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BETWEEN ART AND POLITICS:
Disunity of Black Drama during the Harlem Renaissance

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Abstract

The goal of this work is to prove and map out a split within the newly formed African American drama during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. A split between politicized plays that were used as a tool to raise the spirit and awareness of African Americans, and the "folk plays" that put emphasis on artistic expression without overtly focusing on protest or political agenda. This duality, personified by W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, defined black drama in the period between 1916 and 1937, and the thesis explains it both from the thoretical standpoint as well as a practical one – meaning from the standpoint of its two philosophical leads as well within the plays themselves. First, the thesis shows the point of view of W.E.B. Du Bois, who stood behind the idea of "propagandistic" plays, and then the view of his opponent Alain Locke, who wanted to let go of outright political agenda and instead sought to legitimize the position of African Americans through artistic merit. Both of these lines of thought garnered following in playwrights, which in turn caused the duality. The thesis goes on to map each ideology separately, along with plays that lean towards it. More specifically it examines *Rachel*, *For Unborn Children*, *Don´t You Want To Be Free?* from the Protest School and *The Broken Banjo, Plumes* and *Balo* from the ranks of the Art-Theatre School. The thesis analyzes the topics of the plays, their characters, settings and symbolism and shows how they correspond with each given ideology, thus proving the existence of the disunity of early African American drama.

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je prokázat a zmapovat rozkol nově vzniklého afroamerického divadla během Harlemské renesance. Rozkol, který jej dělil na politické hry, využívané jako nástroj povzbuzení a zburcování Afroameričanů, a „lidové hry“, které se soustředili na umělecké vyjádření, bez přímého spojení s protestem nebo politickou agendou. Tento rozkol, ztělesněný W.E.B. Du Boisem a Alainem Lockem, určoval směr černošského divadla mezi léty 1916 a 1937, a tato práce jej ukazuje jak z hlediska teoretického, tak z hlediska praktického – tedy jak z pohledu jeho hlavních myslitelů, tak přímo na jednotlivých hrách. Nejprve je v práci popsán úhel pohledu W.E.B. Du Boise, který stál za ideou „propagandistických“ her, a poté pohled Alaina Locka, který se chtěl oprostit od přímočaré politické agendy a namísto ní chtěl upevnit postavení Afroameričanů kvalitou uměleckého vyjádření. Oba tyto směry si našli své podpůrce v řadách spisovatelů, což vedlo k oné rozpolcenosti. Oba směry jsou popsány odděleně, vždy spolu s hrami, které se inspirují danou ideologií. Přesněji řečeno jde o *Rachel, For Unborn Children* a *Don´t You Want To Be Free?* z řad Protestního divadla a *The Broken Banjo, Plumes* a *Balo* z řad divadla Uměleckého. V práci jsou zanalyzována témata, postavy, místa a symbolika vybraných her, a je v ní popsáno, jakým způsobem se hry řadí k dané ideologii, čímž je prokázána zmíněná rozpolcenost.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The topic of African American theatre and drama is often overlooked in literary studies and publications, as well as literary canon. At best, it is mentioned in collections of American drama as an experimental venture during the early twentieth century, at worst it is a mere footnote on Wikipedia. But this experimental venture, while it has a much shorter history than other branches of drama, has had a very troubled and complicated life. Unlike "white" drama, which was strongly rooted in the various cultures brought to America by its many settlers, "black" drama had to fight and struggle for survival. Just like any other aspect in the lives of post-abolition African Americans, black theatre was shunned and ridiculed, and yet it inspired curiosity and more often than not, a great deal of admiration. White drama had hundreds upon hundreds of plays of every genre, with an endless supply of topics backing it, black drama, however, at least at its inception, had nothing. It had to define itself, its tone and purpose. In other words, it had hundreds of years' worth of catching up to do.

In the long run, the problem of defining black drama on American stages, would lead to disunity among the leading African American scholars and playwrights during the 1920s and 30s, years known in relation to African American culture as the Harlem Renaissance. This tumultuous period was an opportunity for African Americans to make a breakthrough that had the potential to cancel racial prejudices which tainted everyday life in the United States, and this opportunity was felt and grasped by many. But ideologies related to the issue of how to fully capitalize on this opportunity differed, and so, during the Harlem Renaissance the newly formed African American drama would be split into two factions that employed different artistic styles and had opposite views on the balancing of political and artistic goals within individual plays; with one

school leaning in favour of explicit political propaganda, for which artistic expression suffered, and the other placing its political goals in the background and trying to achieve them through artistic merit. Led by two gentlemen with conflicting views, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and Alain LeRoy Locke, writers of the time established two schools which can be named the Protest School of Drama and the Art-Theatre School. To fully understand the differences between the two sides of this theatrical struggle, the following chapter will focus on the differences in philosophies of Locke and Du Bois. Chapters 3 and 4 will then show how these differences projected themselves into actual works and try to examine Protest Theatre and Art-Theatre respectively. To this end we will discuss protest plays *Rachel, For Unborn Children* and *Don't You Want To Be Free?,* which explore the most prevalent issues discussed in the protest drama of the time and thus serve as fitting examples of this theatrical branch. On the other hand, we will also discuss *The Broken Banjo, Plumes* and *Balo*; plays by authors who chose to forego explicit political intentions and instead focus on presenting and validating the life of African Americans in the biased United States. However, as was mentioned before, African American drama is not the most sought after topic of discourse, and as such requires a certain level of introduction.

Because the situation of African Americans during the 19th and early 20th century was nowhere near as satisfactory as abolitionists might have hoped, and because racism, lynching, rape and general abhorrence towards black people were more than commonplace in the U.S. of the time, many believed that black drama should explore the difficulties of blacks. That it should raise awareness of the problems and issues that white racism imposes upon black citizens, and at the same time that it should bolster the spirit of African Americans; show them their importance and worth, and put their history in the spotlight. The most vocal and influential of such idealists was William

Edward Burghardt Du Bois. "W.E.B." Du Bois, as he often called himself, was one of the first members of the African American intellectual elite. He was a sociologist, historian, author, editor and, of course, an activist. He studied at the University of Berlin and Harvard, where he was the first African American with a doctorate. Clearly he had enough experience and wit to make up his own mind on the course of black art, and in his "Criteria of Negro Art" he stated the following:

> All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of the black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.[1]

This treatise of the Protest School of drama, a school which chose to follow these and other principles of Du Bois´ work, was a counterpoise to the work of another member of African American elite, Alain LeRoy Locke.

Locke was a studied philosopher and writer, he was the first black Rhodes Scholar, receiving his title in 1907. He was the philosophical guide of the Harlem Renaissance and his work inspired and encouraged many writers and other artists, but it also served as a manifesto of the Art-Theatre School. Locke sought to transcend the bounds of general social problems; he thought constantly dwelling on the "Negro problem" was highly restrictive. Locke tried to show playwrights that it is better to stop trying to be wards and protectors of the black spirit and instead try to show that spirit as an active part of American civilization. Instead of trying to be grand and unrealistically demonstrative, the writers should show the folk life in its entirety – humour, nonchalance, imagination and sentiment. Basically focusing on full-fledged

[1] Chester J. Fontenot and Mary Alice Morgan, *W.E.B. Du Bois and Race* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001) 188

characters that emerged from real life situations and had real life attitudes and problems, whether they were African American or not. The goal of this was also covertly "political", we can say, since the result of this venture was to put African Americans on equal footing with the whites - at least on theatrical stages. Locke also wanted to instil a kind of pride in African Americans; but instead of it being a pride based on shared struggles, it would be a pride based on a body of quality literary work.

Despite the fact that Locke had a clear vision for the course of African American drama, he did not express his view publically until the second half of the 1920s. Before that, he tried to persuade writers personally and wanted to change Protest Theatre to Art-Theatre from within. Du Bois on the other hand was much more pro-active. He entered the theatrical world in 1913 with his pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*, and through his magazine *Crisis* put protest authors in the hands of the public. For 11 years, Locke waited, although he found the constant protest indigestible. Then in 1922 he published, in Du Bois´ *Crisis,* the "Steps Towards Negro Theatre," where he distinguished race drama and Negro Theatre, stating that "the latter includes the former but goes further and means more."[2] Negro Theatre is "where all phases vital to the art of theatre are cultivated and taught."[3] The conflict of these two influential men would create a vast ideological gap that would split African American writers for most of the following century. As we will see in the following chapter, their views on what direction the African American drama should take were reactions both to the social situation of the time and to each other's work.

[2] Alain Locke, "Steps Towards Negro Theatre," *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 93
[3] Locke, 93

CHAPTER 2: W.E.B. Du Bois, Alan Locke and their Influence

2.1 W.E.B. Du Bois and the Protest Ideals

It is virtually impossible to talk about the early days of African American theatre without mentioning W.E.B Du Bois. From the start of the twentieth century he lobbied in governmental institutions to create a more fertile ground for the social and cultural growth of African Americans in general, but he also sought to create an institution which he thought would be most suitable for the communication of his ideas and policies: theatre. Of course, what is meant by "ideas and policies" is not some personal gain or career advancement, but rather Du Bois' complex view of the position and the identity of African Americans in the United States. To this end, Du Bois established the theory of the Outer Life throughout his writings, which Locke would later dismiss and adapt into his Inner Life theory. These competing theories would form the lowermost basis that would go on to fuel all the subsequent arguments, and on which theatre would be judged and categorized.

The implications of the Inner and Outer Life were far reaching and touched upon various aspects of the everyday lives of African Americans. Du Bois´ original Outer Life theory is closely related to the theory of double consciousness as it is described in Du Bois' *Souls of the Black Folk*:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[4]

[4] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of the Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994) 2.

The Outer Life, and subsequently also the Inner Life, serve as an extension to this "sense". The condensed explanations of these, and the aspects which are most important for our ensuing discussion of drama, are the following: that which Locke would dub the Inner Life, is the life among the African Americans as a community. It involves interpersonal relationships and the general sense of solidarity. It is also applicable to every single person as a unit: the inner life of a person, his or her personal desires and thoughts. Du Bois saw these as immensely important for the development of a person, but for his purposes and for the needs he saw in the environment of the early twentieth century, the other side of the spectrum was more important.

The Outer Life is concerned with the position of African Americans on the scene of the society of the United States of America and the World. It involves the communication and interaction with people outside the black consciousness and as such, it deals with the struggles and goals that emerged in the years of Du Bois' life and career. Du Bois knew that the Outer Life of African Americans is the piece of black existence that can be communicated much more easily to anyone, not just whites, but also to African Americans themselves. The Outer Life concerned itself with issues such as racism, lynching, sense of racial pride, and the creation of true African American identity. For Du Bois, these things existed outside the confines of everyday lives; outside the Inner Life. These topics had implications that overarched any single African American and moved beyond the community, hence the name: Outer Life.[5]

This is where Du Bois focused his efforts. He knew that he would have carve out an inch for the blacks. But Du Bois wouldn't stop at an inch; Du Bois wanted to take the whole yard. Through the mediums that he could influence, he would seek to

[5] Samuel L. Hay, *African-American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 27.

encourage writers, especially playwrights, to partake in competitions he posted in the magazine he established, published and edited: *The Crisis*. These competitions would go on to put writers such as Willis Richardson into the awareness of the public. To get the plays he selected as the winners of his competitions onto the stage, he sought support and encouragement from the NAACP, and other organisations. And not only that, he himself chose to stand as a stark example of the sort of writing he had in mind, by writing a pageant called *The Star of Ethiopia.*

2.2 *The Star of Ethiopia*

It is no wonder that Du Bois chose the pageant as the bearer of his message. Pageantry was extremely popular in the United States of America during the first quarter of the twentieth century and it was viewed by some as the possible precursor to a form of national theatre. Pageants were held at any possible opportunity: national holidays, commemorations, celebrations or even conventions; any occasion that ought to be combined with a performance, used the pageant. Pageants exist somewhere on the borderline of the theatrical world. As James V. Hatch writes, they are "too pictorial to be a parade, but not dramatic enough to be a play" and they are mostly used for the re-enactment of historical events.[6] W.E.B. Du Bois was fully aware of America's love for the pageant and he saw in it the opportunity for an all-encompassing method with which he could reach his ultimate goal. As a comment on this matter, he wrote in the August 1916 issue of *The Crisis*:

> It seemed to me that it might be possible … to get people interested in this development of Negro drama to teach on the one hand the colored people themselves meaning of their history and their rich, emotional life through

[6] James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, eds. *Black Theatre USA: Plays By African Americans, The Early Period* (New York : The Free Press, 1996) 87.

> a new theatre, and on the other, to reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing.[7]

And so, during 1911 Du Bois set out write down the first several drafts of what would later be known as *The Star of Ethiopia*. The first few versions were called *The Jewel of Ethiopia: A Masque in Episodes*. This masque was rather allegorical and involved the god of thunder, Shango, bestowing the Jewel of Freedom upon the chosen land of the Black Diaspora, Ethiopia. The titular jewel then keeps being lost and found until it reaches the United States. The whole performance is finished with a tableau including heroic figures such as Queen of Sheba, Nat Turner or Mohammed Askia. As the drafts continued, the allegory blended more and more with historical depictions and its name changed to *The Star of Faith* and eventually *The People of People and Their Gifts to Men*, under which it was first performed at the 1913 National Emancipation Exposition from October 22 through October 31. Reportedly over 14000 people witnessed this act in which 350 performers and musicians enacted Du Bois' vision. After that the pageant underwent minor changes and in 1915 it reached the form we can read today and acquired its final name, *The Star of Ethiopia*.[8]

The simple structure of the pageant is this: As it begins blazes of trumpets are heard and four heralds along with flagbearers enter the stage. These characters serve as the only spoken voices to be heard and provide the framework for the performance. They enter proclaiming:

> Hear ye, hear ye! Men of all the Americas, and listen to the tale of the eldest and strongest of races of mankind, whose faces be Black. Hear ye, hear ye, of the gifts of Black men to this world, the Iron Gift, and Gift of Faith, the Pain of Humility and the Sorrow Song of Pain, the Gift of Freedom and of

[7] Hatch and Shine 87.
[8] Hatch and Shine 88.

> Laughter, and the undying gift of Hope. Men of the world, keep silence and hear ye this![9]

In the subsequent six episodes 350 people enact various historical passages and show the gifts which the black race has bestowed upon all of mankind, first showing the Gift of Iron as the savages discover fire and iron and show how "mankind first learned the wielding of iron and thus defense against the living and the dead." (89) The other gifts are the Gift of Nile, meaning the creation of civilization and it speaks of "how the meeting of Negro and Semite in Ancient days made the civilization of Egypt the first in the world." (89) There is also the Gift of Faith, which involves black priests spreading the word of Mohamed over half the world, the Gift of Humiliation, a showcase from the slave trade and oversea transportation, the Gift of Struggle Toward Freedom, and finally the Gift of Freedom; a scene from the fall of slavery which uses historical figures such as Frederick Douglass and Colonel Shaw.

The Star of Ethiopia is Du Bois' vision *in extremis*; it is propaganda in the strictest of senses. Everything is given the most pompous visage and is exaggerated to tremendous heights. Especially the scenes from the distant past are shown with the air of ancient Greek myths and legends; armies march to and fro, a Veiled Woman comes wielding fire and iron and Mohammed himself is present. The scenes from the not-so-distant past depict the chained and working slaves, who bravely stand up to the whips of their cruel masters and eventually triumph through perseverance. But even if we omit the music, the dances, the battles -- the performative aspects of the pageant -- and focus solely on what is said by the heralds, we can see that Du Bois saw this as the ultimate spirit-encouraging and awareness-raising text. The heralds begin each episode with a

[9] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Star of Ethiopia," *Black Theatre USA: Plays By African Americans, The Early Period* , eds. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (New York : The Free Press, 1996), 89.
All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

similar speech as the one shown above. Each "hear ye, hear ye" is followed by a brief description of the black race and there is no shortage of superlatives: the wisest, the gentlest, the bravest, the truest, the humblest, the mightiest, the stoutest, the sturdiest, the eldest and the strongest of races. Du Bois gives the black race a legitimate biblical status, literary placing Africans alongside Semites in Egypt. It is one gigantic counteroffensive against the anti-black propaganda and the pseudo-scientific theories that would place people of black skin below whites. Thanks to the fact that the speeches are powerful, yet very simple, and are repeated countless times, even the children of the lowliest tenant farmers could potentially appreciate this pageant. Such was Du Bois' goal: get the message across to as many people as possible.

THE HISTORICAL PAGEANT OF THE NEGRO RACE AT THE EMANCIPATION EXPOSITION: FORTY MAIDENS DANCE BEFORE THE ENTHRONED PHARAOH RA, THE NEGRO.

A photography of the Egyptian scene in *The Star of Ethiopia* taken in 1913. The description says: "Forty maidens dance before the enthroned pharaoh Ra, the Negro."

Du Bois' *The Star of Ethiopia* is a unique work; no other author that belongs to the protest school of African American drama would ever attempt such a grandiose feat. And yet when one reads their plays, he or she might get the impression that no matter how toned down their works were, they couldn't shake of the feeling of over-exaggeration and artificiality that radiates from *The Star of Ethiopia.* Even characters

in ordinary one act plays form the Protest School exude the need to herald their ideas and the difficulties of black life, the history of the African American is aggrandized and everything moves toward a singular goal: to let everyone know of the glorious pride and damnable tribulations of the black people.

2.3 Alain Locke and the Folk Inspirations

In his "Chronology of Negro Theatre" from 1927, Montgomery Gregory writes: "On March 3, the Drama Committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People of Washington D.C. …, produced under the direction of Nathaniel Guy a three-act race play, *Rachel*, written by Angelina Grimke. … A minority section of this committee dissented from this propagandistic platform and were instrumental later in founding the Howard Players organization, promoting the purely artistic approach and the folk-drama idea."[10] Part of this dissenting minority that Gregory mentions was Alain Locke. As the propagator of his ideal branch of theatre, Alain Locke was much less active than W.E.B. Du Bois. We won't find any major theatrical endeavours in Locke's bibliography. He might not have been as active in his establishment of the Art-Theatre, but that seems only appropriate for what he was trying to achieve: he wanted to make a theatre without overt agendas or political motivations, without stiff propagandistic messages and unrealistic depictions of African American life. We have already mentioned that Locke disregarded Du Bois´ Outer Life theatre. As Samuel A. Hay puts it, for Locke the greatest issue with the plays that sprung from the Outer Life was the fact that their "plots came *solely* from African Americans either in confrontation with whites about racism or as they put the best face forward for

[10] Montgomery Gregory, "A Chronology of the Negro Theatre" *Plays of Negro Life* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927) 414

whites"[11] Locke found "the depiction of real African American plots, characters and themes"[12] those which Locke included into his Inner Life, were important. The effect this was meant have, was to instil "positive self-respect and self-reliance"[13] in African Americans, as well as gaining respect with the white community.

It is widely accepted that to achieve this, Locke took inspiration from the Irish Abbey Theatre, previously also known as the Irish Literary Theatre; an institution that attempted to achieve much the same goals Alain Locke had, albeit in a different context. As Peter Kavanagh puts it, the Literary and Abbey theatres were theatres "in Irish and English language written by Irish authors or on Irish subjects.[14]" John P. Harrington adds that this project of the Irish national theatre "would continue to reveal the culture and consciousness" of the Irish[15]. Much the same statements can be applied to the idea of African American theatre as proposed by Locke, simply by changing "Irish" to "African American". Locke took up the Irish concept of the folk plays; theatrical pieces focused on lives of the ordinary people which revealed and artistically validated the identity of the given "folk". And while Locke often stated that he wants to create theatre based purely on art, without political intentions, by examining his inspirations we can see that the reality was slightly different. The Irish Literary Theatre and Abbey Theatre were national political endeavours, and while Locke's theatre traded the "national" aspect for a racial one, ultimately it had a similar - and political - goal: to represent and create respect for certain "folk" and their social status. The difference is that Locke balanced the politics differently to Du Bois and even the Irish Theatres. The political

[11] Hay, 21
[12] Hay, 21
[13] Hay, 21
[14] Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre: From Its Origins in 1899 to the Present* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1950) 216
[15] John P. Harrington, "The Founding Years and the Irish National Theatre That Was Not" *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* eds. Stephen Watt et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 5.

goal was underlying, it was not to manifest itself in the plays, but rather the Art-Theatre was to focus on making the African American life worthy of theatrical production.

Locke has inspired writers to do just that, through his philosophies and books, such as the *New Negro*, through general encouragement of those playwrights that sought to prove their artistic merits, and through an occasional anthology of drama he himself selected. Precisely such anthology is *Plays of Negro Life: A Sourcebook of Native Drama*. Alain Locke compiled it in 1927 during the time when Harlem Renaissance was in its prime, and after he had already gained some respect within the literary community. Not only does this anthology contain those plays that Locke describes as "the worthwhile repertory of Negro Theatre"[16], but it is also prefaced by an introduction from the pen of Locke himself, which, perhaps more than any other document, lays out his view on the issues of producing African American drama in the world of the early twentieth century.

Locke admits that the scope of African American drama adheres mostly to just one act, but he deems the one act play to be the most profitable form for both writers and actors of the time, and he is very much acknowledging that the history of African Americans grants them a very unique position on the field of any artistic medium. But instead of using this history to refer to specific events, or using it as an excuse for politicized topics, like in *The Star of Ethiopia*, Locke ventures to say that the specific experiences of African Americans have prepared them emotionally for the birth of a new theatre. As Locke writes:

> No group experience in America has plumbed greater emotional depths, or passed so dramatically through more levels of life or caught itself more of those elements of social conflict and complication in which the modern

[16] Alain Locke, *Plays of Negro Life: A Sourcebook of Native Drama* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927) xiii

> dramatist must find the only tragedy that our realistic, scientific philosophy of life allows us.[17]

Locke goes on to say that it is obvious that African Americans have been targets of "buffoonery" on the stage, but instead of preaching aggressive opposition to this stereotype, like Du Bois, there is no trace of aggression in Locke's interpretation. Instead, he makes it clear that there is time for African Americans to shine through sheer artistic qualities. Locke also quite ostensibly distances himself from what he calls "the blight of propaganda and the taint of sentimentality"[18]. According to him, in order to fully reach their potential, every African American writer "had to abandon his puppets of protest and propaganda and take to flesh and blood characters and situations."[19] And indeed such was Locke's aim: to cancel the "reign" of the Du Boisian school over African American drama, and start a new line of small theatres which would be suitable places both for staging of African American plays and platforms for African American actors to shine on. But apart from this, Locke's involvement was minimal; there were no competitions made by him, he did not seek federal endowments or the funds of the NAACP, nor did he go out to the public proclaiming his words to be the only possible mode for the existence of African American drama. His persuasion of playwrights, if there was any, consisted of several words of advice spoken in private, as he was known to do. He did not set up any expectations on the writers other to "take to flesh and blood characters and situations". Such reluctance to prescribe methods and expectations is understandable in the light of what he was trying to achieve, that is: a free theatre; free of both prescription and propaganda.

[17] Locke, xiv
[18] Locke, xvi
[19] Locke, xi

From the above descriptions of the two main men of the early days of African American drama, one might get the feeling that W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke were mortal enemies; one an active and almost megalomaniac propagandistic author and the other a restrained philosopher, but the thing that both men ultimately sought to achieve was the same: equal status for African Americans, both on and off the stage. So the goal of Du Bois and Locke was the same, but the process by which they wanted to achieve it was radically different. Where Du Bois praised and gave his noteworthy support to those writers who portrayed the complicated state of African American existence, preferably raising the stature of African Americans in the process, Locke favoured and silently supported those who simply focused on the lives of African Americans and presented them as they were; with stories that sprung up from the moment to moment, everyday experience. In other words, this is the inception of the ideological disunity; such was the power that split drama between art and politics. Eventually, writers would flock behind one philosopher or the other, and later they would write plays that conformed to the attributes of the two ideologies, without even personally admitting to favour Du Bois or Locke. We will now go on to discuss plays by these writers, and attempt to locate and summarize specific literary devices that defined each school; starting with those that chose direct protest.

CHAPTER 3: The Protest School of African American Drama

Du Bois said that "all art is propaganda," but he was not alone in this belief. While Locke might have been brooding somewhere in his non-commercial theatres, trying to turn a handful of musical plays into a fully-fledged form of art drama, writers from all sides lined up to follow Du Bois' example. Protest plays were being written form the earliest days of the Harlem Renaissance all the way to the first days of the Second World War, and they make up the majority of African American drama we can read or see today. But what does the "propagandistic" or "protest" theatre mean in practice? What are its topoi and how do they manifest themselves in the plays?

Everything is related to the Outer Life. The plot and initiating events of these plays stem from African American experience within the broader society of the US and their topics consider the current position of African Americans during the early twentieth century. Interestingly, the plays stray away from slavery and its depictions, apart from very brief and rather impressionistic instances. The problems and propaganda adhere to the current troubles of African Americans, and many of the topoi of this school of drama can be dissected from *The Star of Ethiopia*. These are very closely related to the purpose of the plays, that is to say, the countering of decades of negative white rumors and stereotyping, which according to Samuel A. Hay, stem from the parodying work of actor Edwin Forrest and sheriff Manuel Noah who deliberately studied and exaggerated specific aspects of African American speech and behavior and thus created the stage type of the "minstrel negro" that would be the only representation of African Americans in drama for years.[20]

[20] Hay, 18.

As was mentioned before, *The Star of Ethiopia* is highly exaggerated to the point of bordering on fantasy. And exaggeration, albeit in a more modest form, found its way from the pageant and into the stage plays. The characters and speech are highly refined, every word is given enormous weight and every action by every character seems to have the utmost urgency and importance. African Americans in the propagandistic plays are full of wisdom, wit and are possessed of fine manners and deep intellect; statues carved to perfection. But with the ultimate personal traits, they also carry the ultimate burdens: poverty, racism, violence, insults, the blind eye of the public and lynching. Lynching in particular reaches an almost mythical status of the Damocles' sword hanging over each and every black man in America. As Koritha A. Mitchell further explains in her extensive work on lynching plays, this form of punishment "evolved into a ritual of violence". [21] This pseudo-mythical act serves as the catalyst for many plays, either as the initial event to set things in motion, or the final one, to put them back to rest. As a result, lynching appears in the discussion below time and time again.

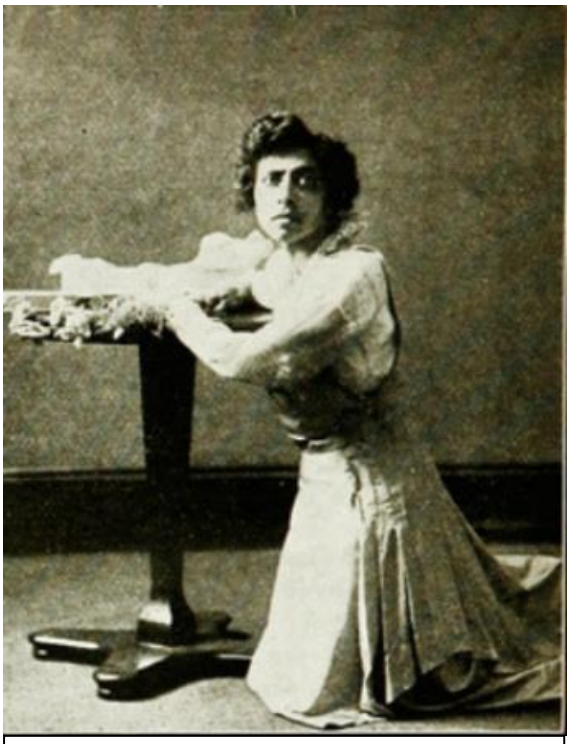
The fact that these plays have a clear agenda and work with very serious and tragic topics, somewhat limits the variety of genres. The propagandistic drama is for the most part limited to tragedies, with an occasional Biblical adaptation. Pure comedies are rare, although this serious tone is understandable in the light of what this movement was trying to achieve. The plays about to be discussed should provide a sufficient sampling of propagandistic protest plays both through time and topical variation; they include Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*, Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* and Langston Hughes' *Don't You Want To Be Free?. Rachel* and *For Unborn*

[21]Koritha A. Mitchell, "Antilynching Plays: Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar Nelson, and the Evolution of African American Drama" *Post-bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture 1877-1919* eds. Barbara McCaskill, Caroline Gebhard (New York: NYU Press, 2006) 220.

Children will show us the most typical dramatic personae, their behavior and language in protest drama, as well as the most frequented topics and commonplaces. Langston Hughes' play, on the other hand, is an example of one of the more experimental plays in the propagandistic school. In many respects it could be seen as a play which is more in tone with Locke's ideas, but its content is so undeniably "Du Boisian" that it serves as a great example of the potential of propagandistic drama to work with alternative forms of theater.

3.1 Angelina Weld Grimké - *Rachel*

Anyone researching African American protest drama will inevitably come across two names. One of those, *The Star of Ethiopia*, has already been mentioned, but the other deserves an equal amount of attention. Protest plays are inevitably more or less a product of their time, but for Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel,* this notion applies twice. All protest works fought against the prejudices and horrors of the time, but very few had an actual "antagonist". The antagonist to *Rachel* was the Ku Klux Klan celebratory film, *The Birth of a Nation* directed by D.W. Griffith. This southern epic won over the white audience upon its release in 1915, but it effectively damned African Americans, who were depicted as mentally deficient and sexually deviant. By contrast, the Ku Klux Klan was seen as a



The titular character, Rachel, as portrayed by Rachel Guy during the play´s premiere in 1916.

brave group of defenders against this blackface menace. Unsurprisingly the African American community was outraged by this piece of cinematography, and the NAACP launched a campaign aimed at banning the film from theatres, which ended in failure. However, the NAACP had other methods of defiance.

In 1916 it began with its search for a new African American play which would be encouraged by this organization and which would be guaranteed to see the lights of the stage. Interestingly enough, one of the members of the NAACP expert commission chosen for this search was Alain Locke. He sought to encourage a play outside the protest field, but the rest of the commission was determined to counter *The Birth of a Nation* with a quintessential pro-African American piece of propaganda.[22]The winner of this competition was *Rachel*, and following Alain Locke's resignation from the NAACP, the play was immediately staged and performed. It premiered to very good reception, and it has become one of the most famous African American plays of the century. It is a testament to its fame that this play, which incidentally celebrated its 100th anniversary this year, is still sometimes revived by theatre companies in the United States and Great Britain.[23]

A recent staging of *Rachel* by the Finborough Theatre in London (2014).

[22] Hatch and Shine, 134.

[23] Two of the latest performances include the London Finborough Theatre´s performance that ran in 2014, and most recently (2015) Rachel has been taken up by the New Brooklyn Theatre in New York. For reactions on the Finborough Theatre performance see: <http://www.themetropolist.com/arts-theatre/reviews-arts-theatre/review-rachel-cursed-mother/> Also see img 1 and 2

Despite this, the play exists mostly on the pages of select few anthologies, and one cannot expect that even the most avid of readers are familiar with its plot. Therefore what follows is an overview of *Rachel,* which not only recounts it events, but it will also allow us to better follow the discussion of it propagandistic aspects.

Rachel is a three act play set in an unnamed northern city in the top floor flat belonging to an African American family by the name of Loving; Mrs. Loving and her two children Rachel and Tom. Mrs. Loving is an older lady, who earns scraps of money by sewing. Her two children are in the later years of high school and they try to support their mother however possible. Few other characters enter the play. One of these characters is the small boy Jimmy, a neighbor of the Lovings, whom Rachel adores and through whom we learn about Rachel's passion and love for children – all children, but preferably the brown ones:

> "I know now why I just can't resist any child. I have to love it … Ma dear, here's something I don't understand: I love the little black and brown babies best of all."[24]

Rachel herself is beautiful, cheerful, full of vigor, compassion and wit; she is virtue personified. After the introduction of Jimmy, one other major character enters the Loving flat. Mr. Strong is a young African American, only a couple of years older than Rachel, who has come to pick up an order for his mother. While Mrs. Loving exits, Rachel and Strong exchange a handful of quaintly flirtatious remarks and Strong is established as a love interest for Rachel.

After Strong's departure, Rachel's brother Tom arrives and the whole family eats dinner, during which Mrs. Loving seems to be in distress. On the request of her

[24] Angelina Weld Grimké, "Rachel," *Black Theatre USA: Plays By African Americans, The Early Period*, eds. James V. Hatch, Ted Shine (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 137.
All subsequent quotations are from this edition

children she tells them that it is precisely 10 years to the day since the death of Mr. Loving and the eldest of their children, George. The details of their demise had been kept from Rachel and Tom, but today they learn that the two members of their family were lynched by a merciless white mob of masked men, following Mr. Loving's angered article in his own newspaper, abhorring an unjustified lynching. The whole story of the lynching is related in a monologue delivered by Mrs. Loving and she doesn't spare any details: Masked men (by inference the Ku Klux Klan), enter the Loving household at night, break down the doors and assault Mr. Loving. He manages to shoot a couple of them, but is eventually overpowered. George jumps to his rescue, but the wrath of the mob turns on him as well. The powerless Mrs. Loving runs to the nursery to cover the ears of her remaining children as painful screams come from the outside. The monologue ends with:

> It was very still when I finally uncovered my ears. The only sounds were the faint rustle of leaves and the "tap-tapping of the twig of a tree" against the window. I hear it still – sometimes in my dreams. (144)

Obviously Grimké intended the lynching to be one of the strong points of the play, as well as one of its key propagandistic aspects, the goal of which is to uncover the horrific conditions African Americans had to deal with. Anyhow, this information is the first event that emotionally strikes Rachel and we can already see her question her primal intention to bear children into this world:

> And the little babies, the dear, little, helpless babies being born today – now – and those who will be, tomorrow, and all the tomorrows to come – have *that* sooner or later to look forward to? (145)

Through Rachel, Grimké obviously pulls at one of the most efficient heart strings of the audience. "Think of the children" is the main idea, used here to emphasize the abrupt and sadistic nature of the lynching, as if it was a disease; scrutinizing and ever-present, but also one that can be cured, through conscious human actions, and Grimké has put

forward the first analysis of this disease to the public. Moreover, the same treatment she applies to lynching, she plans to use on another African American illness in the following acts.

Act 2 opens four years later. Rachel and Tom have finished school and they both try to pursue their duties. Rachel takes care of the household for her aging mother and she lovingly takes care of Jimmy, whom she adopted after a smallpox tragedy that has befallen both of his parents. Tommy tries to find a job and discovers that despite his quality education, his career is stifled by the reluctance of the white majority to hire him. This is the other major problem Grimké deals with: discrimination. Tom is one of its victims: despite his education as an electrical engineer, he is unemployed. Tom is not the only one discriminated against, however. Once again Grimké uses the little ones to stress her point.

After sending Jimmy, as well as a handful of other children, off to school, Rachel has a quiet moment alone. It is interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Lane and her daughter, Ethel. Mrs. Lane is a poor woman looking for a flat in Rachel's building, and she has come to enquire about the quality of the local school. She decided to talk to Rachel specifically because of her name – Loving. Rachel learns that Ethel attended school for mere two weeks and the experience has left her totally devastated. Mrs. Lane describes the experience:

> Ethel is naturally sensitive and backward. She's not assertive. The teacher saw that, and, after I had left, told her to sit in a seat in the rear of the class – in a corner. … The teacher called her sulky and told her to lose part of her recess. When Ethel came up – the children drew away from her in every direction. She was left standing alone. (154)

After this, and regular instances of being called a "nigger," she refuses to talk to anyone, avoids any eye contact and remains reclusive. Rachel is devastated to hear that not only the teacher, but also the children mocked and insulted the little girl. However, she

assures Mrs. Lane that such behavior is unheard of in Jimmy's school, and Mrs. Lane leaves resolved to rent a nearby flat, regardless of the fact that she cannot afford it. Not long after this meeting, Rachel receives a bundle of rosebuds from Mr. Strong, and Jimmy returns from school shortly thereafter. For a while Rachel and Jimmy chatter about the flowers. Jimmy says "Rosebuds are just like "chilyun", aren't they, Ma?" (156) But then, Jimmy asks his foster mother a peculiar question: "Why is a "nigger", Ma Rachel?" (156) He explains his question by saying that children at school started calling him that. Rachel is absolutely beside herself. She loses all hope: she calls all the African Americans an "accursed" people, she curses the "laughing God", and finally she turns her wrath towards the bundle of rosebuds; throwing it on the floor and stomping it into the carpet.

Act 3 is set a week after act 2. Mrs. Loving and Tom are puzzled by what happened a week ago. She found Rachel lying on the floor, unconscious next to a bundle of rosebuds, destroyed and mashed by the soles of someone's feet. Ever since then, Rachel is constantly on the edge of a nervous breakdown, she is always around Jimmy, playing with him, and taking extensive care of him. That evening, Strong arrives and is left alone with Rachel. He says that in spite of his meagre wage, has managed to rent a spare flat, and over the past year he has fully furnished it all for Rachel. Rachel is at first attracted by the proposition of moving in with him, but then she realizes the connotations. Moving in with him would mean a relationship, marriage and children. That is something Rachel cannot believe in anymore. She refuses Strong and says she can no longer meet him. With this the play ends; Rachel's dreams of bearing children and her love life are destroyed by the oppressions of society.

Arguably, the core of *Rachel's* plot is the destruction of motherhood. All mothers we meet in the play are ruined by their horrible experiences, as well as the

experiences of their children. Mrs. Loving can never forget the image of little George, and she is so tormented by the memory, that when she first meets Jimmy, she is repulsed by him because he remotely resembles George. Mrs. Lane is about to ruin her own life by renting a flat she cannot afford, in order to ease the life of her daughter. Finally, Rachel who acts as a brilliant and loving foster mother to Jimmy, and would surely take great care of her own children, is in the end more willing to kill children rather than let them live such a world. Ultimately, the features which characterize the play as propagandistic in the "Du Boisian" sense, consist of four pillars: the problem of violence in the South, the issue of inequality in the North, the unethical treatment of children and, lastly, Grimké's depiction of the African American protagonists.

The problem of Southern violence is the first to come under scrutiny. The Lovings used to live in the south before the death of Mr. Loving, and Grimké was fully aware that at the time of her writing the play, and long after, lynching was a horrid, yet common practice used as mob justice in the more southern parts of the United States, typically perpetrated by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Koritha Mitchell notes that Grimké was the first person, and the first female author, to criticize lynching on stage and as such she depicts it in the most horrifying way possible. [25] First of all, the lynching of Mr. Loving and George was a retaliation for a couple of articles, which were in turn the retaliation for another lynching, during which a man was unjustly accused of rape and killed for petty reasons. Second of all, Grimké shows the sudden and terrorizing nature of lynching. The lynching occurs at night when everyone in the house is asleep and small children are present. Grimké also shows that the fallout of such an event has an enormous effect on every aspect of an individual's life. For fear of safety, Mrs. Loving is forced to move north and she has to do the lowliest of work in order to eke

[25] Mitchell, 215

out a living for her torn family in the uppermost flat of an apartment building. Furthermore, Mrs. Loving's psyche is ruined. On the day of the terrible anniversary, she is constantly distracted and lacks any concentration. She cannot bear anything that would remind her of little George and acts aggressively towards little Jimmy, who seems to remind her of her dead child. Rachel is another indirect victim of lynching, as the horror, which may strike any child destroys her dream of being a mother.

However, the racism and violence of the South is not the only crime American society is guilty of. In the eyes of Grimké, the North is as rotten as the South, only it hides it under the façade of equal opportunities and rights. This view is expressed by Tom in Act 2:

> In the South they make it impossible as they can for us to get an education. … Our one safeguard the – the ballot – in most states, is taken away already, or being taken away. … In the North, they make a pretense of liberality: they give us the ballot and good education and then – snuff us out. (152)

Indeed we can view Tom as the manifestation of unequal opportunities of African Americans, just as we can regard Mrs. Loving as the theatrical example of the horror of lynching. Tom studied hard to become an electrical engineer and in the end he is forced to accept the job of a waiter from Strong, who was once in the very same position and who now serves as the head waiter in restaurant. Tom is the incessant voice criticizing the pretense of the white man, most regularly in Acts 2 and 3 when he gains more insight into the contemporary work market. The character of Tom allows Grimké to voice comments and scorn on the US society and government.

The third pillar of Grimké's propagandistic argument is the degradation of African American children in Northern schools. The character who brings this aspect of black life into the play is Mrs. Lane. She shows the optimistic Rachel the reality of everyday life and how it affects African American children. Tom and Rachel have both

experienced instances of racism during their school years; Tom mentions being called a "nigger" and Rachel recalls a friend who abandoned her because of her color, but as Mrs. Lane suggests: "Every year things are getting worse. Last year wasn't as bad as this" (155). Mrs. Lane goes on to describe Ethel being marginalized not just by the white children calling her "nigger", but also by the teacher, who made fun of her slow movement and shy behavior and generally belittled her in front of the whole class. The effect of two weeks of such ambience is a complete destruction of Ethel's personality.

The last propagandistic aspect of *Rachel* is the depiction of African Americans in the play. Without exception the African American cast of characters is hard working, educated and possessed of the most delicate manners. Rachel is painted as almost an angel, with her excessive and extremely sweet soliloquys on children and motherhood, and her exceptionally lovely treatment of Jimmy. Grimké obviously wants the audience to sympathize with the protagonist, but other characters are also portrayed as exemplary citizens. Tom and Mr. Strong are both highly educated and kind, Mrs. Loving and Mrs. Lane sacrifice everything for the wellbeing of their children and the deceased father of Rachel and Tom was an eloquent and justice-seeking journalist with a heart of pure gold; the type names of Loving and Strong are only the tip of this mountain of perfection. The exemplary stature of the characters flows over to the language they use. It is the most correct and educated form of English. All the characters are eloquent and yet they keep their emotions in check, producing a text reminiscent of classical closet dramas and Victorian romances. Vernacular or incorrect pronunciations are frowned upon in *Rachel* and are either corrected, such as when Rachel corrects Jimmy's childish pronunciations, or they are used to an endearing effect, for example when Tom picks up said pronunciations for Jimmy's amusement.

With the portrayal of lynching unequal opportunities and the prototypical African American characters, Mitchell states that Grimké created a blueprint for propagandistic drama for years to come, effectively creating the genre of plays focused around lynching and its downfalls.[26] But throughout these plays, one cannot shake the feeling that we are viewing the African American life through a very peculiar looking glass, one that emphasizes the tragic aspects of everyday life, but shrinks personalities. Truly, apart from Rachel, the characters go through no development whatsoever, and even Rachel's passage from sweet optimism to drastic nihilism suits the purposes of the protest, rather than that of realistic depiction. Herein some of the exceptions Locke sympathizers might have are evident. *Rachel* is not an ordinary piece of African American life, neither does it attempt to reach any purely artistic goal. Its aim lies solely in the fight with the white majority and the reader might almost think he or she is reading a strange pamphlet with some melodramatic scenes inserted.

3.2 Myrtle Smith Livingston – *For Unborn Children*

For Unborn Children is a great example of this particular field of African American drama, despite the fact that it is very short. In fact this attribute is in no way to its detriment, on the contrary. Because of its limited length, *For Unborn Childre*n serves as an example of most African American plays written during the Harlem Renaissance. These were precisely such short, one-act affairs. Most African American plays strove for relative brevity, so *Rachel* with its three acts stands as the most "epic" text of the time. In the case of *Don't You Want To Be Free?*, the author clearly states that the play should take place within the space of an hour. The cause of the brevity of

[26] Mitchell, 215

these works can only be guessed. Perhaps it was due to the fact that most African American playwrights came from other literary areas, such as poetry, or perhaps it was because most of the hope for potential staging of African American plays lay with the semi-professional or amateur theatre groups and actors, whose ability to work with certain volumes of text couldn't be relied on. Regardless of its cause, what this brevity led to, is the fact that these plays go directly to the core of the problem, and present the most raw and immediate treatment of a single given topic or issue - in contrast to *Rachel*, which handles three or more racial issues. In the space of such a one act play there is no room for character development or convoluted plotlines, but there is no need for it, as once more we must only turn to *Rachel* to see that characters in propagandistic plays serve more as vessels for politicized outcries, and the plot is there merely to give them a chance to do just that.

The second reason why *For Unborn Children* serves as a good example of propagandistic drama is the issue it handles and the angle of approach it takes. At the core of *For Unborn Children* is racial intermarriage and its implications. The interesting thing is that Livingston shows something unexpected. As Ethel Pitts-Walker notes in her introduction to the play: "It was not unusual for Whites to protest mixed relationships; however, little was openly spoken among Blacks on this topic, and Whites often believed African Americans relished the opportunity to cross the racial boundary."[27] Livingston effectively spoke about a taboo; about an idea the black community resented, but hesitated to voice. While in Black drama the white community always remains clearly painted as a mob disgusted with the Negro race, the other side of this equation is seldom seen, that is to say, that throughout the years of racism and

[27] Ethel Pitts-Walker and Kathryn Ervin, *African American Scenebook*, (New York: Routledge, 2014) 25.

bias, African Americans have also become disgusted with whites and hence they might be equally resentful of the idea of marriage between the races. Livingston shows a more aggressive character in the form of Marion, the sister of a man involved with a white woman. She is very vocal in her loathing of her brother for being with a white woman. There is an argument to be made that Livingston presents Marion's views as twisted, but in the light of the play's conclusion, such interpretation becomes difficult.

For Unborn Children is set in the South of the United States in a flat of an African American family named Carlson, which is of a "middle class" social status, or at least so we are told by the author. The cast of characters is quite similar to that of *Rachel.* The family consists of two siblings, LeRoy and Marion, and an elderly woman. The difference here is that she is the grandmother of the two other characters. As the play opens, Marion sits at home in distress because her brother has not yet returned home. Her worst fear is that he is once again somewhere with his white girlfriend. She voices her fears to her grandmother sitting nearby. Immediately we see her aggressive stance towards LeRoy, and also towards Selma, the white woman in question. Marion has this to say about her:

> …a nice girl all right, but she is white and she ought to stay in her own race; she hasn't any right to be running after our men.[28]

As LeRoy returns home, he is immediately pinned down by his sister, and the two siblings argue about the positive and negative aspects of his involvement with a white woman. LeRoy argues for the old truth that "love shall know no boundaries":

> Selma and I can't help it because we don't belong to the same race, and we have the right to be happy together if we love each other, haven't we? (191)

[28]Myrtle Smith Livingston, "For Unborn Children," *Black Theatre USA: Plays By African Americans, The Early Period*, eds. James V. Hatch, Ted Shine (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 190.
All subsequent quotations are from this edition

His sister is much more practical in this regard, and she notes that such relationships are much easier and less destructive for those with white skins, yet in the same monologue she cannot help insulting the white woman:

> I wouldn't spit on a woman like her! ... I know they are as much to blame as we are, but intermarriage doesn't hurt them as much as it does us; laws would never have been passed against it if the states could have believed white women would turn Negro men down, but they knew they wouldn't; they can make fools of us easily, and you're too much of a dupe to see it. (191)

She also tells him that there is virtually no reason for him to date a white woman, as there are plenty African American women, who are thus robbed of their men. In a one of the lines that sums up the core of the play she says: "What is to become of us when our own men turn us down?" (191)

LeRoy turns to his grandmother for comfort, but he does not receive any. In fact, it's the grandmother's speech that serves as the main turning point of LeRoy's intentions. First she says to LeRoy:

> Think of the unborn children that you sin against by marrying her, baby! Oh, you can't know the misery that awaits them if you give them a white mother. (191)

To justify her claim, she reveals the truth about Marion and LeRoy's childhood. Their mother was not an African American, she was a white woman. Their father married her and they had two children, but she made the life of the whole family miserable. She hated the children for not being white, and conversely, that very hatred spread to their father. Grandma Carlson was the one who raised the two children, but she would not be able to go through such an ordeal again.

At this point, LeRoy stands at a crossroad, and so does the play. He could decide to follow through his relationship with Selma, at which point any propagandistic message which has been built up so far, would fall apart because he would go against

what is expected. *For Unborn Children* would then turn from a propagandistic play into a kind of anti-propaganda; the plot would lose its original morality message and become a tragic love story. LeRoy doesn't do so, however. Instead, in the light of the information about his mother, he begins to reconsider his stance. He has no time to elaborate on it, since his girlfriend Selma arrives in the house, breathless and terrorized, and informs LeRoy of a mob coming for him. She urges him to run and hide, but he says it is pointless. The ending of the play is a melodramatic moment: as Grandmother Carlson prays for her grandson's safety, LeRoy and Marion have moment of understanding and regrets. LeRoy also calls to his grandmother:

> It's better this way, Granny; don't grieve so; just think of it as a sacrifice for UNBORN CHILDREN! (191)

After which LeRoy calmly accepts his fate and leaves the house to face the mob. With the words "I am coming gentlemen!"(191) the curtain drops.

For Unborn Children is a direct appeal to both African American men and African American women, asking them not to pursue interracial relationships, towards which the play shows utter resentment. We might expect such an approach from a propagandistic play written by a white author, but Livingston is clearly positioning herself as an almost violent defender of African American purity. It seems that rather than trying to overcome issues posed by the white majority through a discussion, she would see the two races separated. Although at first it seems that Livingston might attempt to take an open-ended approach towards this issue, because Marion speaks hysterically and very aggressively, whereas her brother, the one who should be considered problematic, speaks reasonably and tries to appeal to the Marion's sense of empathy. Any possible interpretation by the viewer is broken, however, when Grandmother Carlson tells the truth to LeRoy and he immediately changes his mind

and admits that his ways are indeed wrong. His being taken away by the mob, then serves *not* as the Romeo-and-Juliet-like act of forbidden love, but as a moment of personal catharsis and sacrifice. LeRoy leaves without a fight, as he has accepted his supposed "sin". Hatch and Shine fittingly describe the situation thus: "The Black male, LeRoy, is to be lynched, yet, incredibly, he accepts his "punishment" as justice; a justice administered not by the lynch mob, but by the playwright."[29] By having LeRoy do so, Livingston manages to have all characters accept that miscegenation is damnable, and LeRoy's initial arguments seem like the words of a light-headed fool. Thus Livingston's first propagandistic message is born: Do not entangle yourself with the whites, African Americans, for such relationships always end worse for the blacks involved.

There is also one other implicit protest in *For Unborn Children*; one which positions Livingston among many other writers, white or black, who have all played to one theatrical stereotype. The talk is of the figure of the tragic mulatto. This particular figure is a recurring phenomenon in many art forms, but its fate is always the same. As a mulatto, the child of one black and one white parent, this character is stuck between two worlds. The qualities or weaknesses the mulatto might have inherited from each given race are irrelevant, as the tragic aspect of the mulatto's life comes from the society; or rather, societies. The white will never accept the mulatto, for the color of his or her skin, and the blacks do not intend to cater to the mulatto either, be it because they want to distance themselves from anything even remotely white or because the mulatto is a living proof of miscegenation. In his overview of the mulatto persona David Pilgrim summarizes this concept as follows: "Every mulatto was proof that the color line had been crossed. In this regard, mulattoes were symbols of rape and concubinage."[30] So,

[29] Hatch and Shine, 188
[30] David Pilgrim, „The Tragic Mullato Myth", *Ferris.edu*, Ferris State University, Nov. 2000 <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mulatto/> 2. Apr 2016

throughout history the mulatto was always portrayed as a figure suffering from a lack of security and social contact, and in order to play into the theatrical tradition and expectation, the mulatto had to either die or be banished forever from whatever land he or she inhabited. Livingston is obvious in her acceptance of this tradition. As soon as LeRoy learns of his origin, he says: "My God! That makes it different!"(191). Whether he is talking about a new found understanding for affection for the whites, or if he speaks about his new inevitable fate, is difficult to say. What is not difficult to say, however, is the motivation behind LeRoy accepting his lynching without resistance. Yes, he deems himself worthy of punishment, but he is also a mulatto, and knowing this, he automatically realizes he is lost no matter what his actions will be, and he succumbs to the mob.

Stylistically, *For Unborn Children* is in many ways a continuation of *Rachel's* approach to the portrayal of African Americans. Despite the fact that it is set in the South, the play is written without any accent or vernacular language whatsoever. In addition, even though the information has no effect on the plot or conclusion of the play, Livingston finds it important to assure the reader, or viewer, that the family lives in a flat "evidently of the middle class" (189). In the same vein, and even less necessarily, in the list of characters Livingston tells us that LeRoy Carlson is "a young lawyer." Neither one of these details figures in the play in any way, but it feels as if Livingston wanted to assure us of the qualities of her characters, not just by making them speak a refined language, but also by giving them a respectable background.

3.3 Langston Hughes - *Don't You Want To Be Free?*

It would be unjust to claim that the propagandistic aim of these playwrights detracted from the innovative side of African American drama. If most propagandistic plays, *Rachel* being the prime example, kept the stark outlook and exaggerated characters, then as time went by and the Harlem Renaissance was coming to a close, a new wave of writers entered the field of drama. Among them was the renowned poet Langston Hughes. In his poetry, Hughes often deals with the problem of African American consciousness; he seeks to find a suitable place for the black community in the USA, such as in the poem "I, too", but he is also keenly aware of his long lost African ancestry, as can be seen in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", published in 1921. Also, where most poets of the Harlem Renaissance chose to work with classical poetic forms, like sonnets and villanelles, Hughes wanted to make poetry in his own way, with distinctly African American elements. He experimented, he chose to forego traditional form or meter and instead incorporated aspects of Jazz and other music into his work. As Harold Bloom mentions in Hughes" biography was "tapping into the rich vein of the Jazz tradition"[31].

No wonder then, that when he decided to write plays, the results were comparably unique. The nature of this play and its place in the field of African American drama is a parallel to the rest of Hughes' work. Whereas others chose to work with poetic forms created in the profoundly white Renaissance Europe, he wanted to be profoundly African American. Whereas for example *Rachel* is a fairly traditional family drama, full of long soliloquys from its characters and keeps close to realist principles, Hughes' plays are minimalist, experimental and full of black personality. His dramatic

[31] Harold Bloom, *Langston Hughes*, (London: Infobase Publishing, 2009) 116.

magnum opus is *Don't You Want To Be Free?*. Its magnificence comes not from its length (the play should take about an hour according to the author's notes), but from its popularity which stems from the way it attempted to represent the troubles inherent in late 1930s America. The Great Depression took much from all US citizens, black and white, and Hughes saw the desperate nature of the time very clearly. *Don't You Want To Be Free?,* which premiered in 1938 and achieved 135 reprisals, is in many ways an exception to protest drama and seems to lean towards the liberal approach of Locke. The play was deliberately staged in the non-commercial minimalist Harlem Suitcase Theatre, it experimented with added art forms, such as poetry or music, sometimes actually bordering on a somber musical, and thanks to its attempt to unite all impoverished people, regardless of race, it also had a potential to appeal to a topic known to both the black and white audience. "The play's appeal to unite poor blacks and whites against exploitation by the rich remains powerful although in retrospect, it is difficult to believe this was ever a real possibility." Hatch and Shine note on Hughes´ efforts.

So the methods were close to the "art" theatre, but the tone and approach to the subject matter is clearly in the vein of the "propaganda" theatre. In many respects connections can be drawn between *The Star of Ethiopia* and *Don't You Want To Be Free?*. The play takes the form of a kind of diorama of African American history, where each scene reflects a facet of black suffrage, but also of collective pride and courage, which serve both to educate and rally the masses. Unlike *The Star of Ethiopia*, however, *Don't You Want To Be Free?* is not a grand spectacle. It is, as the author describes it in the production notes, "an impressionistic play"[32]. The stage should be barren and

[32]Langston Hughes, "Don´t You Want To Be Free?," *Black Theatre USA: Plays By African Americans, The Early Period*, eds. James V. Hatch, Ted Shine (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 268.
All subsequent quotations are from this edition

minimally lit, with only a single prop – a lynching rope hanging in the center of the stage. The characters are as minimalist as the rest of the production, they are more like images, living specimens or prototypes, such as A Man, A Woman, or An Old Woman. Lastly, the scenes should flow into one another without any break or pause. This is the extent of the staging notes provided by Hughes for this stylized modernist play. What is interesting, is that along with practical notes, Hughes also provides notes for the producers as to what sort of audience might find this performance appealing. The following is an excerpt from said notes:

> GROUPS TO BE CONTACTED FOR PROMOTION: This play should appeal especially to Negro History groups, labor unions, social workers, and liberal and progressive organizations of all types, as well as Negro and fraternal groups. (268)

The note then goes on to suggest that the best way for this play to be advertised is via "word of mouth" and that it is always beneficial to perform it in a smaller auditorium for fewer people, as it allows the actors to connect more with the audience. As Hughes says, "the idea behind this type of production is cause the audience to feel that they as well as the actors, are participating in the drama." (268) This level of specificity, when it comes to the audience for the play, and the belief that the ideals of the play should be spread among the members of the public shows that Hughes was writing the plays with clear messages in mind.

As mentioned before, the play is highly impressionistic and characters jump through times in history creating an atmosphere comparable to those of pageants. A Young Man, who serves as a sort of focal point for the play, starts speaking from the auditorium and addresses everyone in the room with a short speech. He tells the audience that this is a show for them and that despite the barren nature of the stage, they need not worry, because despite the lack of props, the theatre company has something

more – faith – faith in themselves and in the audience. When this connection is established, the Young Man reveals the topic of the play:

> It's about me, except that it's not just about me now standing here talking to you – but it's about me yesterday, and about me tomorrow. I'm colored! Guess you can see that. Well, this show is about what it means to be colored in America. (268)

He then recites a poem, the first of many that are interlaid between individual scenic actions. It opens with "I am a Negro" and goes on to recapitulate the roles that Negroes played through the years: slaves, workers, singers and victims. Each role then juxtaposes an image from the African past with the present or the not so distant history of America. For example in a section entitled the "victim":

> I've been a victim:
>
> The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
>
> They lynch me now in Texas. (269)

Just as *The Star of Ethiopia* puts forward the gifts of the Nero race and then shows individual scenes that illustrate these gifts closely, *Don't You Want To Be Free?* lists the social statuses of Negros and then proceeds to expand on them. But just like *The Star*, it offers a glimpse of proud and free life in Africa, life which is now in an almost mythical dimension. It becomes clear that Africa becomes a kind of Garden of Eden, from which Negros were torn by force. After this poem, a Boy and a Girl enter the stage and to the sound of soothing music and they recite poems celebrating this bygone life in Africa.

Advancing through time, another poem describes the Negros being taken away on ships to America, after which the first scene is performed. This scene presents a slave auction, the perpetrator of which is the Overseer. Much like other dramatis

personae, he is a recurring character, always standing in for the changing face of the white oppressor. The scene of a slave auction obviously serves as a reminder of the dehumanization and objectification of blacks during such processes. Proof of this is offered after the successful sale of a young girl when voices coming from offstage suggest that the whites regard blacks as primitive and subordinate:

> Cook them white folks dinner,
> Wash them white folks clothes,
> Be them white folks slave-gal,
> That is all she knows,
> Be them white folks slave-gal,
> That is all she knows. (270)

These offstage voices of collective conscience or knowledge invade the play and serve as the primary source of judging statements, and in turn they deliver the first half of the protest. In their own poetic manner, they scorn the white man and the troubled times, and they work in tandem with the other protest source of the play: the more active and rebellious archetype of the Young Man. The Young Man is the third entry in the slave auction, following the Girl and an Old Man. To the Overseer's command, "Boy, get up on that block / And make some dough for me!" the Young Man sternly replies "No! I want to be free!" (270) the Overseer strikes the Young Man down with a whip, another connection to *The Star of Ethiopia* becomes clear when the chorus of remaining blacks begins to sing:

> Go down Moses,
> Way down in Egypt land,
> And tell ole Pharaoh,
> To let my people go. (271)

Once again a Biblical reference likening Negros to the Jews which hints at the grandeur and importance of these events for the black community and warrants such comparison.

The Young Man's desire for freedom is catered to very shortly thereafter, as the voices carry names of historical figures into the play such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Brown or Abraham Lincoln. These names signal the eventual arrival of the Civil War and apparent freedom. Also, here for the first time, the Young Man suggests the equality and cooperation between whites and blacks, when he acknowledges the fact that soldiers of both races fought side by side for the end of slavery.

From Biblical comparisons and historical figures the play moves forward to another set of iconic topics: tenant farming and lynching. For this scene, the Young Man steps into the position of a tenant farmer who has to deal with a greedy landowner. As an argument ensues, the Young Man is unable to keep his nerves and he strikes the landowner. He pauses, but he is aware of what will follow so he looks for a place to hide even though there is none. As the Young Man proclaims "I'm dead!"(273), a Newsboy enters the scene and through him the injustice and barbarities connected to lynching, that is to say, the artificial justifications made up by the southern media or members of the Ku Klux Klan are conveyed. The Newsboy shouts:

> Negro lynched in Alabama! Big Lynching Near Selma! Read all about it! Read about the lynching! Negro accused of rape! Big lynching! (273)

These few lines by the Newsboy might get lost in the whole action of the scene, but they are perhaps the most evocative expression of the lies behind each lynching.

Just like in *Rachel*, the effect of lynching on the family of the Young Man is central, but Hughes seems to suggest that lynching had a more global effect on African Americans, that is that it accumulated with other hardships and led to the creation of blues. Hughes gives the blues a significant role the play; it seems he holds it, along with other musical innovations, as the biggest gift from the African American culture to the

world. Like Du Bois, he likes to remind the audience of the achievements, or in this case the musical achievements, of African Americans. The Young Man's lines "Colored folks made the blues! Now everybody sings them." (276)

Through blues the play moves to its final topic and phase, that is, job opportunities or rather lack thereof, and the Great Depression. The Young Man complains about the lack of suitable and fitting jobs for even the educated blacks, a topic already seen and discussed in connection to Tom Loving. What is more interesting are the avenues the Great Depression opened up for Hughes in terms of making the issue of unemployment, or unsatisfactory employment, more perceptible to the white audience. Of course, the Depression hit people of all races, and Hughes knew that for the first time, a great number of whites was in the same position as blacks, and are therefore more likely to listen to his messages and sympathize with his fellow African Americans. As the Young Man gets into another dispute with the figure of the Overseer, this time about the problems of his work conditions, a White Worker enters the stage and gets into the following dialogue:

OVERSEER	Who are you?
WHITE WORKER	A white worker. You don't have to be colored to know what hard times are. Or to want a square deal. I can tell you that!
OVERSEER	Well, what do you want?
WHITE WORKER	A world where there won't be no hard times. And no color line – a labor with white skin'll never be free as long as labor with black skin is enslaved. (280)

After another set of dialogues between the oppressive overseer and a handful of other characters highlighting various hardships, the situation escalates into the Harlem Riots of 1935. But for the Young Man, riots and violence are not the answer. The key to success is unity and organization. Here Hughes tries to rally the audience, not just African Americans, but whites as well. Hughes' final message voiced by the Young

Man sums up the whole point of the play: “We’re all in the same boat! This is America, isn’t it? It’s not all colored. Not all white. It’s both.” (282)

Don’t You Want To Be Free? concludes this study’s discussion of the Du Bois inspired propagandistic and protest school of drama. The playwrights who thought that the area of the theatrical stage should be used for such purposes stuck closely to topics that any African American could easily relate to and at the same time, they showed these topics to the white audience. Yet, each of the presented plays brought something of its own. Overall Grimké’s *Rachel* is the most prototypical of the three. With its portrayal of African Americans as nearly flawless, highly sophisticated individuals with hearts of pure gold, and by spotlighting the two most primal problems of the African American community, racism and inequality, it really encompasses every facet of the propagandistic theatre. A reader might indeed get the feeling he or she is reading a pamphlet rather than a play, as generalized comments on society make up the bulk of the text with the potentially heartbreaking story of Rachel taking second stage. Hughes’ *Don’t You Want To Be Free?* is aesthetically very different to *Rachel*, but despite this, it still remains firmly within the reach of the dramatic ideals set by Du Bois. Its style tries to be as innovative and forward-thinking as possible, no doubt an attempt by Hughes to prove that African American literature and drama can very much keep up with the changing trends. Its form and language are also very distinct; music and musicalized poetry takes up half, if not more, of the text, and the language is colloquial interspersed with double negatives and vernacular expressions, far away from the “high English” of *Rachel*. Yet, its intellectual load is very much the same. If *Rachel* and *For Unborn Children* are cries for help, then *Don’t You Want To Be Free?* is a call to action. Nevertheless, all the plays have at their cores the same idea of African Americans; a proud race with a deep history, being stepped on by the alien world around them. But

of course, the features of propagandistic drama can only be fully illuminated by a discussion of folk art drama, and the different form it takes on.

CHAPTER 4: The Art-Theatre of Alain Locke

As we move to the discussion of the Art-Theatre as proposed by Alain Locke, a couple of things should be stated: this school of theatre appeared only later - it is usually connected with the early 1920s and after - and by its nature was a lot more liberal. It is precisely this liberal approach that makes it much more difficult to discern its unifying features. As Hay aptly notes "Locke's Art-Theatre was principally defined by what it was not."[33] To illustrate the problem, we can turn back to the Protest School. This school built itself around topics of racial inequality and struggle, the language was always in its most correct state and the characters were caricatures of perfection. The Art-Theatre, by contrast, is more easily defined by what features it lacks, rather than those it has. The goal of the Art-Theatre was to create situations and characters that would mirror the real life more closely, and so the array of characters and plots is far wider and much more spread than that of the Protest Theatre. With the Protest Theatre, the topic of lynching regularly surfaces, but in the Art-Theatre no such repeated plot device that can be safely labelled as "typical Art Drama." But is there anything then that would define the Art-Theatre as a group in the same sense as the Protest Theatre?

First and foremost, there is the focus on rural and poor characters. As was already mentioned Alain Locke saw the greatest potential in plays modelled after the Irish folk plays; plays that should reveal the soul of the ordinary people. Hence characters are modelled on Southern, rural African American experience. This approach then opens avenues for other typical features of the folk plays, and to reveal them we will look at two folk tragedies and a "sketch of Negro life": Willis

[33] Hay, 23

Richardson's *The Broken Banjo*, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Plumes* and Jean Toomer's *Balo*. The three plays are only a fraction of the wide variety of genres, but out of this highly varied field, they are the most representative of the few features that underpin the Art-Theatre. The plays of Art-Theatre always include characters who deal with troubles that have nothing to do with racial injustice. The plots of Art-Theatre spring from situations that are very diverse: *The Broken Banjo* is centred on a murder, *Balo* is both about the life of rural family and about the revelatory experiences of their son, and *Plumes* is about the choice between frail hope and a dignified goodbye. But these problems are not represented as the results of the racially biased society. The focus is clearly on the Inner Life between the characters and the relationship within a given community, rather than the Outer Life relationship of the African Americans with the rest of the world.

Secondly, the Art-Theatre defines itself by its complementing of plot and symbolism. The focus of the plot is always on characters rather than messages - meaning plays are always more concerned with the immediate situation and its resolution, rather than presenting a wide-reaching social message about the state of the Black community. That is not to say, however, that the plays are entirely devoid of the racial issues, but these issues are in the background: poverty and racism exist in these plays, but they are mostly expressed symbolically in minor details, which enhance the main plot by infusing it with social commentary. But a commentary on African American consciousness – not the aggression of the outside society. That said, it should be said that symbols are used in the Protest Theatre as well – obviously – but they are either general symbols, like Rachel stepping on the roses symbolic of love, or stereotypical, like the mulatto in *For Unborn Children*, or they do not leave room for any differing interpretations, like Hughes´ use of a hanging noose in *Don't You Want*

To Be Free?. Symbols in the plays we are about to see are original, often complex and situation specific. This shift from the literal to the symbolic treatment of any commentary is very much in tone with the tenants of the *Art-Theatre*.

Lastly, there is a more practical difference between Art-Theatre and Protest Theatre; the kind of language in which the texts are written. This might seem as a fact not worth noticing, after all the plays in the Art-Theatre were set in the South, so they would have to adapt, but the use of the now so called African American vernacular has a far more important role and far deeper reaching roots. As we have already mentioned in the late nineteenth century a white sheriff called Manuel Noah was instrumental in creating the minstrel Negro buffoon persona. His intention was to discredit small theatrical companies, and one of his greatest weapons was language. Apart from being a sheriff Noah was also a critic, who regularly attended African American dramatically performances and devalued them in his reviews; but apart from that, he often commented on the way African Americans dressed and spoke. Later, when he learned to emulate the African American vernacular, he exaggerated it and used it to ridicule African Americans. Simply put, the Southern African American vernacular was stigmatized, it was the language connected to the "buffoonery" Locke spoke about and African American art – especially drama – had to figure out how to approach it. As we have seen Du Bois sought to distance himself from the vernacular; the language of the protest plays was easy to understand, refined and profoundly scripted, to show the audience that the language of the minstrel Negro is not the only way African Americans spoke.

Locke and those that shared his views were took the completely opposite approach: they embraced the vernacular. Again taking inspiration from the Irish folk theatre which, along with other goals, sought to make Gaelic a "legitimate vehicle" for

plays[34], the Africa American drama took the African American vernacular a chose to make it valid language for writing of drama. Folk plays are written in the rawest form of the vernacular language, and that means not just grammatical features, but also the phonetic resemblance. This feature is always noticeable at the very first glance. The pages are filled with words mimicking pronunciation of the African American vernacular speakers of the time and the double negative and other grammatical irregularities are let loose with abandon in the texts of these plays.

4.1 Willis Richardson - *The Broken Banjo*

Willis Richardson's *The Broken Banjo* is one of the most famous plays of the period and it had a very interesting rise to prominence. While the play is undoubtedly an example of the art-folk plays, it was actually first recognized by W.E.B. Du Bois. In one of his annual competitions to pick the best play according to his standards, he came across Richardson's one act piece. As a result *The Broken Banjo* ended up being printed on the pages of Du Bois' *Crisis* magazine and eventually even performed by the Du Bois founded Krigwa Players in 1925. Such a production history might suggest that *The Broken Banjo* is an example of Protest Theatre, but a closer examination of the text reveals that *The Broken Banjo* is as far from the Protest Theatre template as a play can be. Today *The Broken Banjo* is to be found in Alain Locke's compilation of African American drama titled *The Plays of Negro Life*, where it is described as "a folk tragedy".

The entirety of *The Broken Banjo* takes place within a tenement room of an African American couple, Matt and Emma Turner. The setting is supposed to be

[34] Shaun Richards, *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 52.

contemporary. As the play opens, Matt is sitting in the corner of the room picking away at his banjo, producing a sound his wife Emma finds absolutely insufferable. Naturally, she angrily addresses Matt about this and the two get into a fight. This fight is used as a device to introduce some of the conflicts that are about to be developed, as well as some further facts about the Turner household. Thanks to the fight, it is clear that the Turners are a poor couple, despite the fact that Matt works hard on night shifts and his wife attempts to increase their income by working herself. This is precisely what Emma uses against Matt saying: "If Ah hadn't worked, we'd 'a' gone to the poorhouse."[35] Emma proceeds to call Matt selfish and proclaims Matt feels no affection for anybody or anything, except his banjo. Matt defends himself by claiming that nobody likes him anyway: "Don't your whole family despise the very ground Ah walk on?" (304). Matt then verbally brings in the two other important characters of the play: Emma's brother Sam and cousin Adam: "Didn't Ah have to beat the devil out o' that black brother and cousin o' yours before they'd let me alone?" (304) To the insult of calling them "black" Emma responds: "Sam and Adam is just as light as you." (304) Their introduction now being over, Matt asks Emma not to let Adam or Sam into the house under the excuse that they always come in and eat everything that is in the house.

Matt returns to his beloved banjo, but Emma comes back asking Matt about his wages. If he works all night long, how is it possible then that he has no spare money? He does give Emma enough to run the household, but not a cent more. Matt admits that he has managed to put aside five dollars and he intends to use them to "buy some music with." Emma immediately mentions that he shouldn't buy music, when his wife is in need of new shoes. After a short verbal exchange Matt agrees to buy Emma new shoes,

[35] Willis Richardson, "The Broken Banjo," *Plays of Negro Life: A Sourcebook of Native American Drama*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Harper & Brothers , 1927) 304.
All subsequent quotations are from this edition

but only if she tells Sam and Adam to stay out of their house. Matt himself cannot do that; he is afraid he might get into a fight and would have to beat them up again.

After Matt leaves to buy the shoes, Sam and Adam pay a visit to Emma, and sure enough they ask about food, which Emma says there is none. Adam immediately suspects Matt has something to do with this: "Matt's been spoonin' with huh and turned huh against us." (308) However, it would appear that Sam is the one that seems to have a much bigger problem with Matt. He says he would love to stick his knife between Matt's ribs, but he also says: "Ah got him in the palm o' ma hand." (309) Adam is bemused by Sam's confidence, but Sam expands upon what it is, that gives him the upper hand over Matt:

> No, Ah ain't kiddin'. Ah don't kid when Ah talk about him. Ah could tell you a thing or two if Ah wanted to. You know they ain't caught the one that killed old man Shelton yet. (310)

With this, Sam calls Emma from the kitchen and threatens to reveal something about Matt. Emma stays faithful to her promise and asks Sam and Adam to leave the house. Reluctant to leave without speaking his mind, Sam reveals that Matt is the killer of old man Shelton and Sam has witnessed the murder. Sam didn't mean any harm to his sister, but now that he feels like Matt has turned her against him, there is no sense of hiding the truth. Sam recounts the murder thus:

> …Ah seen Matt comin' along picking his banjo and not watching where he was walkin'. He walked right in old man Shelton's potato patch. Then old man Shelton ran out and started beating Matt over the head with a stick. He hit Matt once or twice, but the next time Matt put up his banjo to knock off the lick, and the lick broke the banjo. That made Matt so mad that before he knowed it he had picked up a rock and hit old man Shelton right in the head… (312)

Emma is of course reluctant to believe her brother, and dismisses the matter. Sam points his attention towards Matt's new banjo and with the words: "This old thing's give that guy a lot o' trouble" (312) he attempts to pick it, unsuccessfully. Adam wants to show

Sam how to play the banjo, and in their argument, they break it. Emma realizes the significance of this accident and hides the broken banjo from sight in just before Matt arrives, bringing her new shoes. Immediately, he notices his banjo has disappeared from the table, and it is nowhere to be seen. Emma desperately tries to take Matt's attention away from the banjo, but to no avail; Matt is bent on seeing his beloved instrument. Under pressure, Emma reveals it. Matt is furious and threatens to take back the newly bought shoes if Emma doesn't tell him, who broke the banjo. Sure enough, Emma breaks again and points to Adam and Sam as the culprits. Matt is instantly furious and starts after Sam, reaching for a chair to hit him with. Sam keeps his calm and screams out: "Don't you hit me with that chair! Ah know who killed old man Shelton!" (315) Matt is speechless and puts the chair down, as Sam gains back his initial confidence, snapping fingers into Matt's face and again proclaiming: "Ah got you in the palm o' ma hand!" (315)

Matt coldly walks across the room and locks the only door leading out of the house. He is determined to make Sam and Adam swear on the Holy Bible, that they will never tell anybody about the murder of old man Shelton, even if he should beat or starve them to force them to do so. Reluctantly, Sam and Adam both swear "Ah do." with their hands on the Holy Bible and are allowed to leave. Matt then calmly turns to Emma tell her that she too must never tell anybody about Shelton. Emma is not willing to believe her relatives would give up so easily in their pursuit of destroying Matt; she thinks not even swearing on the Bible would stop them. She persuades Matt to leave the county and try to hide somewhere far away. Matt and Emma make up; they leave the trouble of money behind and both admit to being less than adequate partners for each other. Just as Matt is preparing for his departure, Sam bursts in with a police officer and points to Matt saying: "There he is!" Matt drops his banjo and reaches for his club,

but is held back by Emma who warns him, he might make things even worse for himself, which Matt dismisses with: "Ah'm in all the trouble Ah can get in! It can be no worse!" (319) But Emma is incessant: "Yes, it can be worse! They won't give you but ten or fifteen years for old man Shelton 'cause you didn't mean to do that, but if you kill this man they'll hang you!" (319) After this, Matt surrenders and says his last goodbye to Emma.

Viewing *The Broken Banjo* just as a contemporary viewer might have seen it, it must be admitted that at first there is not much to set it apart from the protest plays like *Rachel* and *For Unborn Children*. The setting seems quite similar: a low income African American family trying to get through life. The difference is there is never any comment made on the state of the Turner family. They are poor, but they both accept it as a fact of their everyday lives and they try and adjust to it. One might argue that in a one act play such as *The Broken Banjo*, there simply isn't enough room to fit a lengthy soliloquy bemoaning the poverty of the Turner household, but there is not even a slight inclination to do so by the characters. This difference in approach to depiction of African Americans is pervasive in all of Willis Richardson's writing and is in stark contrast to the depictions in *Rachel*. And it is *Rachel* that is directly responsible for Richardson's approach. As Charles S. Watson mentions in his *History of Southern Drama*, it was precisely the propagandistic style of *Rachel* that pushed Richardson to write in compliance with the Art-Theatre.[36]

This extends to the question of race. Race is present and skin colour is mentioned, but it not the single most important issue. The plot revolves around struggles that stem from aggressive personalities within the same community, not from

[36] Charles S.Watson, *The History of Southern Drama* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015) 154.

aggressive input from the Outer Life. That is not to say that the racial element is completely absent, but as we have already said, it takes on a symbolic form. Here, the racial symbol is certainly the banjo. As a musical instrument it has a very strong connection to the lives of African Americas; and it means more than the stereotype of the musically talented African American. Especially in the theatrical dimension, music was the only means of expression for African Americans prior to the Harlem Renaissance – be it in a minstrel show, in which some Africans Americans participated willingly in order to earn subsistence, or through the more dignified Black musical plays. As Leslie Catherine Sanders mentions in The Development of Black Theatre in America the banjo is "an instrument emblematic of slavery and the minstrel show, and he is so fiercely protective of it … that he kills once for it and almost twice."[37]

By establishing this connection between music and the African Americans, the banjo and actions Matt takes because of it, allow us to explore the internal struggles of the African American community, all without directly intervening with the main plot. The internal struggle within the African Americans to deal with the colour of one's skin and the kind of tension this creates between the African Americans themselves is exemplified when Matt tries to verbally place himself above his wife's siblings because of the relative darkness of their skin. This rivalry eventually results in the second banjo being broken and Charles S. Watson goes as far as to prescribe this symbolic broken banjo to the "brokenness of the black community"[38]. The most important aspect of this symbolic interpretation of the banjo is the fact that these interpretation do not intervene directly intervene into the plot. Richardson does not force the characters to comment on the broken state of their race, neither is he pointing fingers, so to speak, on anyone.

[37] Leslie Catherine Sanders, *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 31.
[38] Watson, 155.

The focus of *The Broken Banjo* is on a crime committed by a man pushed to the limits of stress. The murder does not serve as some sort of proof that oppressed African Americans are pushed to terrible deeds, it is simply a means to showcase a facet of Matt's personality. As is the information about Matt's job. He works all night long and presumably for a meagre pay, but this is not touted as a comment on the poor state of southern Blacks, it is device used for fleshing out Matt's and Emma's motivations. All these comments are kept in the symbolic dimension, which adds another layer to the play and is fully in tone with what Locke saw as the art in Art-Theatre. But apart from the symbolic objects *The Broken Banjo* also introduces something very concrete; something which protest plays omitted for the most part: a concrete figure of an antagonist – and what is more: he is an African American.

In the protest plays, there is never a single character who would stand against the protagonists of the play. In *Rachel*, the cause of the heroine's nervous breakdown is the general pressure of the white world around her. There is no specific person who causes Rachel's downfall, everything is the result of the unseen hand of the white majority. The same applies to the ending of *For Unborn Children*, where the protagonist succumbs to the pressure of the white mob, which can be heard, but not seen. Even the white Overseer in *Don't You Want To Be Free?* is less of an antagonist persona and more of a generalized manifestation of the white majority in society. Yet in *The Broken Banjo*, Sam is obviously painted as an antagonist to Matt, despite the fact that they are both African American. This shows that African Americans are not just a race of people whose only defining characteristic is the struggle against injustices of society, but they are just people, with different motivations that might collide and create conflict – this whole aspect then modified by understanding the "brokenness" the banjo symbolizes. Overall *The Broken Banjo* is doing precisely what Alain Locke

intended: it attempts to create full characters of African Americans, out of flesh and blood, that have human traits and that deal with troubles within the everyday life of the African American community. This also entails negative characteristics on the part of the protagonists; after all Matt is a murderer, accidental or not.

4.2 Georgia Douglas Johnson – *Plumes*

Georgia Douglas Johnson's play *Plumes* is another play that represents the Art-Theatre, since all the basic facets of Art-Theatre are present: the focus on rural characters of the lower classes, a plot that concerns important personal decisions, rather than social commentary, with an added symbolic dimension and a textual focus on vernacular speech. Georgia Douglas Johnson was one of the earliest female playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance and many of her works gained reputation by being printed in African American magazines similar to *Crisis*. The most important platform Johnson used for the propagation of her plays was an African American academic journal called *The Opportunity*. In 1926 she won an honourable mention in *The Opportunity* theatrical contest with *Blue Blood* and in 1927 she submitted *Plumes* to another round of the contest and won the first prize, which meant that *The Opportunity* would print the play, raising its chance for actual staging. Inevitably the play was picked up by a theatrical group known as The Harlem Experimental Theatre, which played *Plumes* from 1928 onwards.[39] Along with *Blue Blood*, *Plumes* established what was to become a focus of many of Georgia Douglas Johnson's subsequent works; like the *Blue Blood*, *Plumes* centress on the struggles of women and sets the action in their kitchens.

[39] Judith Louise Stephens, *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 21.

Plumes revolves around the character Charity Brown, an African American woman living in a poor cottage somewhere in the South. As the imaginary curtain opens, we see Charity coming out of the only other room of the cottage. In that room is her fourteen year old daughter, Emmerline. As of late, Emmerline had been very sickly and Charity is clearly in distress over this situation. She is getting some help in the household from her friend Tildy, who is so close to Charity, that she calls her sister. This time, Tildy is helping Charity finish a dress for Emmerline that Charity wanted to finish for a long time. In a conversation about the dress, we notice that Charity is not particularly sure about the future of her daughter saying: "She won't have anything to wear if she --- she ---"[40] Apparently Emmerline's health has been the same for a very long time. As Tildy mentions "Doctors is mighty onconcerned here lately" (290) and Charity is starting to lose faith in the help of doctors: "But I tell you the truth, I've got no faith a-tall in 'em. They takes all your money for nothing" (291) and after Tildy remarks that doctors "don't leave a cent for putting you away decent" (291) we see the main motivation behind Charity's lack of hope.

Emmerline's sickness has made Charity think about Zeke, her husband, who has died sometime in the past. What worries Charity the most is the manner in which he was buried:

> But it worries me when I think about how he was put away … that ugly pine coffin, jest one shabby old hack and nothing else to show -- to show --- what we thought about him. (291)

Zeke's death was not, however, the last tragedy to befall Charity, as her other daughter, Bessie, has also died in an unspecified time in the past, when she was still a very small

[40]Georgia Douglas Johnson, "Plumes," *Plays of Negro Life: A Sourcebook of Native American Drama*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Harper & Brothers , 1927) 289.
All subsequent quotations are from this edition

child. Again Charity is depressed by the state of Bessie's funeral. She has resolved that the next time someone from her family would die, their funeral would be magnificent:

> But I made up my mind the time Bessie went that the next one of us what died would have a shore nuff funeral, everything grand, -- with plumes! (292)

To this end Charity has been saving every last cent the "dollar and a half" she receives for washing clothes. After this talk of funerals Tildy and Charity have a cup of coffee. Charity remarks that she would love to be able to show her cup to someone who can read the future from the coffee grounds on the bottom of a cup. Tildy says she used to read from the grounds and offers her services to Charity. From Charity's cup she makes out a vision of a large grouping of people coming one by one to something in a line stretching far out of sight.

Before the women can settle on the true nature of the vision, a church bell rings and a funeral procession of one Bell Gibson passes by the windows. The procession is apparently very grandiose and Charity reports that her friend told her the cost of the funeral was precisely fifty dollars. "The plumes is what cost" adds Charity. After the procession leaves, Dr. Scott arrives on the scene and immediately goes in to inspect Emmerline. After he comes out of Emmerline's room again, he resolves he has to operate, which will cost, even with a discount, precisely fifty dollars. Charity desperately tries to make the doctor say that an operation would not be necessary, but the doctor appears firm in his belief that for Emmerline, it is either an operation or death. Charity is in utter confusion, she tries to explain herself to the doctor "If she goes --- if she must go … I had plans --- I been getting ready ---" (297) and ultimately, she is reluctant to let the doctor operate, because "coffee grounds don't lie" and she would rather give Emmerline a decent funeral than rely on a small hope which might save her.

After Dr. Scott leaves to give Charity a moment to decide, strangling noises are heard from Emmerline's room and despite Charity's best efforts, Emmerline dies.

From an analytical standpoint, *Plumes* presents a somewhat more complicated entry in the folk art drama than *The Broken Banjo*. That is because we can look at *Plumes* from two perspectives: one that takes into account the whole range of Johnson's work and one that looks at *Plumes* from a purely textual point of view. Viewing *Plumes* against the backdrop of Johnson's work, we must conclude that at first glance Johnson was a playwright who did not conform to the ideals of either Du Bois or Locke. Judith Louise Stephens, author of an anthology of Douglas Johnson's plays titled *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*, makes a very thorough overview of Douglas Johnson's theatrical work. Stephens mentions that Johnson herself distributed her plays into five categories: "Primitive Life Plays", "Historical Plays", "Plays of Average Negro Life", "Lynching Plays" and "Radio Plays."[41] These categories showcase the wide range of Johnson's topics. For example *Plumes* which figures in "Primitive Life Plays" is a play devoid of political messages, but Johnson also wrote plays in a category that could trace its origin back to *Rachel* - the "Lynching Plays." Considering the time and environment in which these lynching plays were written, than by their very nature, plays about lynching carry an intrinsic protest message. Johnson was not afraid to cross the borders of the two African American theatrical schools. Judith Louse Stephens describes Johnson's view this way:

> Johnson's independence in devising dramatic categories suggests she developed her own views on the theatre and maintained a clear sense of the contribution made by her plays.[42]

[41] Stephens, 19.
[42] Stephens, 22.

Stephens suggests that Johnson developed her own ideals about the direction and production of African American drama and mentions the fact that Johnson never used the labels of "folk drama" or "protest drama", it was only Alain Locke who branded *Plumes* a folk tragedy, for example.[43] However, if *Plumes* is considered as a standalone play, multiple features that correlate with Locke's vision of drama reveal themselves.

Once again, the play uses the folk vernacular. *Plumes* is not a play of long monologues, in fact the overall length of Charity's or Tildy's utterances rarely exceeds two sentences. These sentences are littered with grammatical incorrectness, abbreviations, contraction and words written out in a phonetic manner such as "jest", "gethering" and "I shore will." These might seem like minor details, but they are a proof of conscious effort of the part of the author to create characters that are much closer to the real life people living in the South of the United States.

From the overall plot description given above, it should be clear, that the topic of the play does not leave an opportunity for politicization. The dying daughter of a poor woman and the depiction of a struggle with the forces of pure chance and her own determination is far from the struggles with the downfall of lynching or the problems of interracial marriage, which are topics that Johnson also wrote about. By its most basic synopsis this is not a play of protest, and the rest of the plays clearly marks it as a folk tragedy, just as Locke proposed. While for Stephens describes Johnson's "Primitive Life Plays", which include *Plumes*, as those dealing with life after the end of "the uncivilized (primitive) institution of slavery"[44], there is reasonable room for disagreement. There is no mention of slavery in the play, nor is there anything to

[43] Stephens, 22.
[44] Stephens, 22.

suggest that the poor state Charity find herself in is a direct result of slavery. The play is simply a depiction of a difficult situation in a poor family.

The Art-Theatre defining symbolism is also not absent from Plumes, and like in *The Broken Banjo*, it takes shape of the titular object: the plumes. This symbol is quite less obscure compared to Richardson's banjo, but nevertheless it is important for the full appreciation of *Plumes*. They can be understood not just as a desire to provide a respectable farewell to a member of the family, but also a kind of desperate, almost macabre desire to improve one's economic and social status. Admittedly, there is nothing that would make this symbol and desire profoundly African American, but this seems to be due to the fact that Johnson pushed the racial element even further away than most Art-Theatre authors, and tried to create a kind of equality between Blacks and Whites. To prove that the racial element is evened out, we must only look to one of the characters, Tildy. She supports this theory by implying that *Plumes* is a story of "poor people" rather than necessarily being a story of "poor black people." When Charity regrets the fact that she couldn't provide a better funeral for her baby daughter Bessie, Tildy comforts her with these words: "Do hush, sister Charity. You done the best you could. Poor folks got to make the best of it." (291) Notice that Tildy says "poor folks", not "our folks" or "black folks", and through this little piece of dialogue we get a proof that seals the fact that this is not a play primarily about race, but about people and their ability or inability to deal with stressful situations. But yet again, Johnson employs symbolism and subtlety, not overt commentary, in order to make her point. And she was not alone to try and prove this specific point, as we will encounter similar, albeit more explicit, kind of equalizing attitude to race in the next play, Jean Toomer's *Balo*.

4.3 Jean Toomer – *Balo*

Jean Toomer was primarily a poet and a novelist; his novel *Cane* took the world of Harlem by storm and established Toomer as one of the prominent artists of the Renaissance.[45] However, like so many other African American writers of the time, Toomer also wrote for the stage. His debut effort was written for the Howard Players in order to be performed during their 1923-1924 season. In Frederick L. Rush's analysis of Toomer' plays, we can read that during the period, the theatre company of the Howard Players was primarily interested in presenting drama without a political agenda, and in fact, so was Toomer[46].

Toomer, who grew up as a son of a Northern aristocratic mulatto with no ties to the South, admits that his work and interest in the folk life of African Americans was mostly influenced by his stay in Sparta, Georgia. He was so fascinated by his experience there that he wrote:

> A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty … a deep part of my nature … sprang suddenly to life and responded to them.[47]

Readers can trace these feelings in his novel *Cane*, and in an even rawer form in *Balo*. Toomer himself called *Balo* a "one act sketch of Negro life" and as such it arguably exists on the borderline of the theatrical world. It is folk theatre in its purest form: devoid of propaganda, protest, political agendas and even plot. It is a collage of interconnected images. In a sense, it is a counterpart to *Don't You Want To Be Free?*, but instead of focusing on scenes from the "glorious history of the Negro race," it focuses on the everyday experiences of a Negro farmer. By being precisely this; a

[45] Hatch and Shine, 223.
[46] Frederik L. Rusch, "Jean Toomer's Early Identification: The Two Black Plays," *MELUS* 13.1/2 (1986): 116, JSTOR < http://www.jstor.org/stable/467228> 2 May 2016.

[47] Hatch and Shine, 223.

stripped form of drama, it lets the most basic elements of the folk drama school shine. As Ted Shine and James V. Hatch write in their foreword to *Balo*:

> If *Balo* is more a sketch than a play, it is also more honest than most folk drama because the characters are not burdened with plot. Instead, we meet people going about their everyday lives.[48]

Whether it is a sketch or a full play, *Balo* still fits those features typical for Art-Theatre. Toomer was primarily a poetical novelist and this fact left an undeniable imprint on the play, because first "image" we get in *Balo* is an exceedingly detailed description of the life Jean Toomer created for the Lee family, the protagonists of the play. This description would have probably remained hidden to the theatre goers of the time, considering the fact that some of the details in this lengthy prosaic description would have been extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, to transport from the pages to the stage. Nevertheless, Toomer intended the play to be directed and performed with this "prologue" in mind, and as such, it is as relevant for our discussion as any other part of *Balo*.

Balo is set in 1924 in Georgia during harvest time, and much of the initial description is devoted to a picturesque representation of the specific day on which the play takes place, as well as the living room which serves as the sole location for all of *Balo's* action. Toomer goes so far in his description of the house that he goes back in time, remembering the grandmother of the protagonists, who is never even mentioned afterwards. Apart from introducing Will Lee, a farmer and the owner of the house, and his wife Susan, the prologue tells that Will had a very good harvest last year, and so despite the fact that this year his patch of cotton trees didn't yield much of a crop, he and his family are getting by reasonably well. The situation is exactly the same for

[48] Hatch and Shine, 223.

Will's neighbor, Mr. Jennings; a white farmer. The prologue describes the living conditions of the Jennings family in detail:

> The old frame mansion still stands, or rather, the ghost of it, in the direct vision of the front door, its inhabitable portion tenanted by a poor-white family who farm the land to the south of it and who would, but for the tradition of prejudice and the coercion of a rural public opinion, be on terms of a frank friendship with their colored neighbors, a friendship growing out of similarity of occupations and consequent problems. As it is, there is an understanding and bond between them little known or suspected by northern people.[49]

As was mentioned above, such detailed information would be impossible to portray on stage, but the relationship between Will Lee and Mr. Jennings does surface later in the play.

After the lengthy prologue the play opens with the words of a prayer; Will's Morning Prayer. As he finishes the prayer, his sons, Balo and Tom, return from their harvest of sugar cane. Their religiously minded father bids them to read from their Bibles and Balo gets so carried away in his reading of St. Matthew VII, 24 that he begins to sing. This is his first step in a religious transformation, which serves also as an interlude between individual scenes.

After Balo's musical number the scene turns into Will's conversation with Tom. Will recounts the results of his harvest. He has harvested an overwhelming amount of corn and sugar cane syrup, but since these are commodities that are in abundance everywhere, he cannot profit from them, so he concludes that "Farmin's gittin' p'oly" (226) and returns to practicing his hobby of preaching. This scene flows right into the visit of Mr. Jennings, the white farmer. Will and Jennings enter into a conversation about the difficulties they both had with their harvests and the possibilities of moving North.

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[49] Jean Toomer, "Balo," *Black Theatre USA: Plays By African Americans, The Early Period*, ed. James V. Hatch, Ted Shine (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 225.
All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

This whole scene is a clear attempt at an on stage manifestation of the paragraph describing the relationship of Mr. Jennings and Will. They both speak with a degree of respect towards each other and they prove kindness and care; Will gives Jennings a barrel of surplus syrup and Jennings offers to send over his son in order to fix Will's door handle. Jennings also proves good attitude towards racial differences when he appreciates Balo's comment that "White folks ain't no more'n niggers when they get ter heaven." (227)

After Jennings leaves, the Lees get a different set of visitors: Cousin Bob, his wife Mamie and their children. An inevitable conversation about the harvest and the struggles of everyday family life ensues, but is interrupted by another visitor, Uncle Ned, a blind old wise man. The whole group eats supper after which Balo comes back to the scene and performs a "Negro melody" called "Steal Away" on a small organ. This musical performance is so exciting to Balo that it serves as another step in his religious journey towards God. As Balo finishes his second musical number, unspecified couples visit the Lee household and take seats in the now crowded room. Uncle Ned is the one to start the conversation this time, and he brings up the topic of harvest for one last time, but also manages to bring up the equality between whites and blacks when he says: "White folks hit th' same as blacks this time." (229) With his knowledge of the Holy Bible Will then likens the lives of Africans Americans to the journey of Saul of Tarsus to Damascus, which is followed by the whole group humming a low tune. This combination of religious imagery and almost ritualistic atmosphere is the final part of Balo's revelation. He jumps to the front of the stage and proclaims "Jesus, Jesus, I've found Jesus!" (229) Balo then completes his third and final musical number, falls to his knees and his journey to see God is complete. As the play ends the wise old Uncle Ned blesses everyone and takes Balo away.

The nature of this brief summary of the play is reflective of *Balo'*s structure. Indeed it might seem almost as plotless and disjointed, but that is due to its dual nature. Like the two previously discussed plays, which employed the dimension of the actual plot and the symbolic dimension, *Balo* also operates on two levels. Unlike the two previous plays, however, it distinctly separates these two dimensions by creating a series of almost mundane images juxtaposed against Balo's spiritual journey. The individual images that make up most of *Balo* are, as we have seen, mere courteous debates about everyday things or ordinary life problems: last year's harvest, a broken handle, the possibility of moving, dinner and so on – far from the tragic events of *Plumes* and *The Broken Banjo* and even further from the mobs and lynching of the Protest Theatre. These unremarkable dialogues are both Toomer's attempt to replicate the most basic daily actions of the Southern rural life, but also a set of images that complements the symbolic dimension of *Balo.* But before we move onto the discussion of the symbolism, it is important to note that even from the aforementioned mundane scenes an important point arises: given the proper circumstance, Whites and Blacks are absolutely the same. In a way this is an extension of Tildy's remark from *Plumes*, as she consciously places herself in the community of "poor folks" and thus erases potential racial distinctions. In *Balo*, the erasure of racial and social distinctions is far more explicit. Lees and Jennings are families that live next to each other and therefore the ups and downs of farming life that effect one, are going to affect the other as well. Both the farmers are in the same financial situation; a not particularly perfect financial situation - as Uncle Ned concludes one of the harvest discussion: "White folks hit th' same as blacks this time." (229) And given the circumstance the boundaries that would have been set up by racial prejudice - especially in the South – seem to dissipate.

This seemingly ideal state is, however, made more complicated by the symbolic imagery of this Art-Theatre play. Indeed, even here we can say that the symbolic dimension of the play stems from its title, as Balo – the boy – is a carrier of an inexplicit commentary on the state of the Lee family and subsequently African Americans as a whole. By juxtaposing the spiritual character of Balo and the mundane activities of his family it puts focus on an African American issue. This issue is fittingly summarized by Emmanuel Sampath Nelson in his commentary on *Balo*. Nelson likens Toomer's approach in *Balo* to his novel *Cane,* and states that both emphasize: "the separation of the middle class blacks from their emotions"[50] – the force causing this issue being white Christianity which "functions as the primary divisive force."[51] Nelson than proceeds to put the seemingly ideal relation between African American Will and white Jennings into a more ambiguous light. He brings back to mind the Toomer's description of the two farmers´ friendship which would be frank "but for the tradition of prejudice and coercion." (225) According to Nelson: "The Lees and the Jennings cannot have an open and free friendship because of preconceived social and racial limitations, established by the same white culture fostering the Western perception of Christianity."[52] But there is a way to truly step around boundaries of prejudice and the person to find it is Balo. Even before his final revelation Balo tells to Jennings that "White folks ain't no more'n niggers when they get ter heaven." (227) This is the first indication that Balo is able to see the true "oneness of humankind"[53] and completes his spiritual journey through his devotion and zeal. It would theoretically be possible to interpret Toomer's approach to the white Christianity and its connection to a certain desensitization of Blacks as a kind

[50] Emmanuel Sampath Nelson, *African American Dramatists: An A-Z Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004) 443.
[51] Nelson, 444.
[52] Nelson, 444.
[53] Nelson, 444.

of blaming and even protest, but the way in which Balo completes his journey is not dissenting – he completes it through acceptance. And perhaps as a proof that Balo's revelation is not a singular occurrence, he is left with the only other character that explicitly comments on the equality of Whites and Blacks: the similarly spiritual Uncle Ned. And so, *Balo* befits the Art-Theatre measures perfectly by creating dramatic situations that in and of themselves put forward thoughtful ideas, but also by adding a symbolic dimension which complicates said ideas and allows for deeper commentary on internal problems of Black consciousness.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that *Balo* is also very much compliant with the claim that folk plays are written in vernacular language. From the previous citations of the play this fact should be clear. Interestingly, Toomer is much more playful in his use of accents and the vernacular, than Johnson and Richardson. Most characters speak in a fairly similar manner, with certain exceptions. When it comes to the quotations from the Holy Bible, Will cannot resist his accent even when he is reciting the text, but Balo who is closer to God, recites the scripture without the accentual contractions and other irregularities. The other exceptions are Cousin Bob and Mamie, whose accent appears to be thicker and at times almost difficult to read in silence. Takes this line by Mamie for example: "Reckoned I'd jes' tote it wid me, 'kase dese hungry mouths don't nebber git e'nuf t'eat" (227). We could even go as far as saying that the language is another way of hinting at the equality of Whites and, because the Lees speak in the vernacular accent that does not differ in any detail from the language of the Jennings, implying that the vernacular language of African Americans – the language ridiculed in the minstrel plays and fought for by the Art-Theatre – is no different from that of the Whites.

This chapter analyzed three different plays from the Art-Theatre that ideally represent this category; they are very diverse, but they share underling similarities. But like the plays of Protest Theatre, art plays are not without issues. These primarily include the disparity between what they set out to do and the actual texts. The Art-Theatre sought to create characters that would appear as real life representations of African Americans, in which it partially succeeded; the characters are a far cry from the starched caricatures of *Rachel* and other protest plays, but these complex characters are without exception placed into one act plays. Where in the case of the Protest Theatre, this worked in favor of what this branch of drama was trying to do and allowed for a direct treatment of a given problem, in the case of the Art-Theatre, the one act play is a significant limitation. The characters are not allowed to develop, and if they are, then the development is almost nonsensical, such as Balo's rushed vision of God. However, such faults can be expected in plays that come out of a young and quickly developing branch of drama and are supplemented by far richer and deeper symbolism that allows for differing interpretations and implications.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

The plays discussed in this thesis are examples representing a much wider range of plays that explicitly or implicitly belong to two basic categories that laid the groundwork for the future of African American drama. As was said in the beginning of this work, African American drama went through an accelerated stage of infancy during the Harlem Renaissance in an attempt to quickly create a body of dramatic texts that would represent the black community alongside poetry, prose and music. Consequentially, in this haste to become relevant, the early African American drama became a drama of extremes; extremes of ideals and extremes of the two kinds of consciousness African Americans felt and feel as a minority. The double consciousness as proposed by Du Bois, and the following Inner/Outer Life theory both consider African Americans as torn between the two facets that define this community – the African and the American; the life within a community that shares a heritage and race, and the life within a broader, multicultural, yet unaccepting community. *Rachel*, *For Unborn Children*, *Don't You Want To Be Free?* and even *The Star Ethiopia* are manifestations of the latter facet of double consciousness taken the extreme. The features they share are those that can be found throughout the entirety of the Protest School of Drama: the focus on social issues faced by African Americans, the neglect of characterization, which succumbs to the talk of the aforementioned issues, and a reliance on history and religion, as exemplified by *Don't You Want To Be Free?* and *The Star of Ethiopia*.

Plays such as *The Broken Banjo*, *Plumes* and *Balo* took a wholly different stance on the use of drama. The writers of these one act performances, and many others, shared Alain Locke's belief that the drama will best serve the African American community if

it treats agendas and ideals as secondary goals. In Alain Locke's theory, the African American drama was meant to strive for what arguably all great dramatic works must achieve; in the light of authors like Eugene O'Neill he wanted the drama to focus on human characters in dramatic situations. But even these seemingly liberal plays are not devoid of extremes. The desire to push away ideology has led to creation of plays like *Balo* which take the idea of characters so far that they actually lack plot, and are reduced to scenes of human interactions.

But despite this extremity, the oft neglected world of African American drama is one that has a lot to show to those who study it. The birth of the Black theatre was not easy; the battle between those who sought to use drama for political and propagandistic purposes, and those that thought it would fare better without an agenda led was both a way towards progress and a hindrance. W.E.B. Du Bois" sympathizers were the first to breach the seemingly impenetrable barriers between black drama and white audiences, but the plays suffered because of this, as if the writers like Grimké felt that they must use every second in front of the audience to address as many issues as possible. So the intriguing fates of Rachel or LeRoy and Selma from *For Unborn Children* end up lost among the flurry of political language and ideals. The Locke side of the conflict of views was not without fault either. While they did successfully manage to write compelling plays without the need for blatant political messaging, they failed to achieve their goals. The African American characters portrayed on stage have moved towards more realistic persons under the pens of the Art-Theatre playwrights, but they were far from the flesh and blood characters Alain Locke envisioned.

The beginning of the twentieth century is, however, only a small fraction of the history of the so called "Negro Drama" and the duality of African American drama was not just a matter of the pre-World War II years. The two sides argued over the proper

roles of drama for decades to come, always spurred on by the events that were important to the African American community or the entirety of the United States. The Art and Protest Schools would adapt to the time and they would branch out into many fractions, some of which were trying to break down the walls separating the two schools, and some of which would take the original ideas to the extreme. But the source of the conflict could always be traced back to W.E.B Du Bois and Alain Locke; the men who, unaware of the impact it would have, started the disunity of African American drama.

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Key Words

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Drama

Theatre

Harlem Renaissance

One act plays

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Alain Locke

Protest Theatre

Art Theatre

Folk Plays

Outer Life

Inner Life

Langston Hughes

Angelina Weld Grimké

Myrtle Livingston

Willis Richardson

Jean Toomer

Georgia Douglas Johnson

Rachel

The Broken Banjo

The Star of Ethiopia

Symbolism

Propaganda

Klíčová slova

Afroamerické

Drama

Divadlo

Harlemská Renesance

Jednoaktové hry

W.E.B DuBois

Alain Locke

Protestní divadlo

Umělecké divadlo

Lidové hry

Vnější život

Vnitřní život

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